

**RECYCLING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE  
PROJECT #577**

**Borough of Ambridge, Beaver County, PA**

**Review of Existing Waste, Recycling &  
Yard Waste Collection Services and  
Recommendations to Ensure Act 101  
Compliance and Improved Service.**

**Ambridge Borough, Beaver County**

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## **PROJECT CONSULTANT**

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**Nestor Resources, Inc.**

## **PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT**

The Borough of Ambridge is a small but densely populated community located in Beaver County. Based on the 2010 census, with a population of 6,895, Ambridge continues to meet the criteria established by the Municipal Waste Planning, Recycling and Waste Reduction Act (Act 101) which mandates select municipalities provide curbside waste, recycling and yard waste collection. Mandated municipalities have populations which either exceed 10,000 or are between 5,000 and 10,000 and with a population density of 300 persons per square mile. The Borough has traditionally attempted to comply with these regulatory requirements with a combination of services. Leaf waste collection is provided by Borough employees. Waste and recycling collection services are provided by an outside contractor whose services are secured through a competitive bidding process. An added concern is ensuring that residents have access to adequate outlets for select electronic waste items, which have been banned from disposal under the provisions of the Covered Device Recycling Act (Act 108).

The Borough requested technical assistance to improve the overall effectiveness of their next residential collection contract and to ensure that the contract specifications convey to the contractor the level of services expected to satisfy the Act 101 criteria. In addition, the Borough sought to compile information on managing the devices banned from disposal under the CDRA.

## **APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY**

To launch the project, a series of conversations occurred between Nestor Resources, Inc. and the Borough Manager. The purpose was to obtain background information on the existing conditions. Financial circumstances, as well as service concerns were discussed. In addition, finding convenient outlets for Borough residents to comply with CDRA were also reviewed. With all of these issues in mind, Nestor Resources, Inc. reviewed and commented on the Borough's current collection contract and local solid waste related ordinance.

## **KEY FACTORS IN CONTRACT DEVELOPMENT**

For collection programs to be both effective and affordable, they must be appropriate to local conditions. The demographics, the geographic layout, and the economy are important factors in determining the types and levels of services to request from potential contractors. Added influences include the availability or lack of local resources, political concerns, and the current nature of the marketplace.

### **Demographics**

Ambridge's initial growth was a direct result of the once prospering iron and steel industries. The collapse of those plants and mills has had a long-term impact on the Borough. Not only have employment opportunities and wages for local residents shifted from steel's reign in the Beaver Valley, the industrial and commercial tax base has decreased significantly for the area's local governments expected to provide public services.

Based on the US Census Bureau's data from 2000, the Borough of Ambridge had a population of 7,769. The 2010 US Census indicated that the population had decreased to 7,050 and the estimated 2014 population was 6,895. Approximately thirty one percent of the population is over the age of 55. The per capita income for the Borough was \$15,089. About 16 percent of families and 17.8 percent of the population live with incomes below the poverty line. There is no indication that these trends will reverse anytime in the near future.

Nearly 82 percent of the housing units in the Borough are single-family detached (51 percent) or multi-family dwellings with four or less attached units (31 percent). The largest portion (61 percent) are valued from \$50,000 to \$99,000 with 30 percent valued at less than \$50,000. The amount of owner occupied and rental units is almost evenly split. The majority of the housing units have been occupied by the same residents for less than 15 years.

### Comments

It is important to hold landlords accountable for payment of waste collection fees. In low-income neighborhoods, where renters must pay for waste collection, the temptation to avoid the cost of disposal runs high. The number of renters combined with the low median income would be a challenging scenario in which to implement a pay-as-you-throw program. The Borough could consider some unit or volume based options where the amount of trash placed at the curb is limited to a certain number or size of containers. Volume based units have been shown to incentivize recycling, and could lower the Borough's disposal costs.

The Borough acknowledged the risks and reality of illegal dumping as a major concern and barrier in moving to any type of limited waste collection scenario. However, limiting the amount of bulk waste items that can be placed at the curb for collection was seen as an improvement to the bid specifications. It is expected to improve the appearance of the community on collection day and provide a small step toward a collection system, which could introduce some type of limits in the future.

### Budgetary Concerns

Affordability is important for any municipal purchase. In a community where a high percentage of the population have incomes at or beneath the poverty level, it becomes a priority. The municipality contracts with and pays a local service provider for waste and recycling collection services. The residents in the Borough of Ambridge are expected to pay user fees. Each housing unit is invoiced for water, sewage and waste and recycling collection. The Borough charges each residential or commercial unit a flat rate. There is no limit to the amount of waste that can be placed at the curb for collection.

### Comments

The Borough indicates that its delinquency rate is relatively low. Nevertheless, the Borough takes the loss for any nonpaying accounts, which it cannot afford as it already struggles with insufficient funds to meet the needs of the community. Any increases in the price per household for waste and recycling services could cause the delinquency rate to increase. Therefore, controlling costs is important.

The current waste and recycling contract for the Borough of Ambridge sets fees by the ton of material collected. There is no direct correlation between the actual amount of waste collected from each unit and what they are charged. No enforcement mechanisms exist to prevent non-residents from dumping their waste on the curbs of Ambridge to avoid paying for service themselves. Neither is there a check and balance system to ensure that the contractor does not collect waste from places outside of the jurisdiction of the Borough's contract, and subsequently charge the Borough for the disposal of that material.

A per unit rate is more common in Western Pennsylvania municipalities where contracted service is conducted. The Borough agreed to incorporate this rate structure into its new bid specifications.

It offers a fixed and stable cost to the municipality for budgetary purposes. In addition, it provides the municipality with a more realistic basis with which to establish user fees.

Another incentive to recycle is to ensure that all housing units are provided with receptacles to store recyclables and transfer them to the curb for collection. It was suggested that the Borough could include a requirement in its upcoming contract for the service provider to purchase and deliver recycling bins to every unit in the Borough. It is anticipated that participation and recovery will both improve.

### Logistics

The Borough of Ambridge has 3,921 housing units located within a land mass of only 1.5 square miles. At any given time an average of 600 units are vacant. Currently, the Borough's contractor collects waste and recyclables on four route days from 2,745 residential units and 73 commercial units. That's roughly 700 units per day. Depending on the proximity of the disposal facility or transfer station, it is conceivable that the waste collection could be serviced by one vehicle with a driver and a helper. Some companies may consider using only a driver, but with unlimited collection, that could be difficult.

### Comments

With multiple collection days the Borough has expressed concerns that, at any given time, with unlimited collection and multiple collection days some part of the community is continually occupied by trash bags and bulky waste items. The Borough was approached by service providers who suggested collecting the entire borough on one day.

While that option has the benefit of limiting the visible trash in the community, it is not without pitfalls. In Beaver County, Chippewa Township and the Borough of Coraopolis both experienced service disruptions due to a switch from multi-day to single day collection.

First, there are a limited number of companies that may be able to dedicate a fleet of trucks to the community for the day. Therefore, such a condition could restrict the level of competition in the bidding process. Secondly, missed pick-ups and other service issues occur in every contract. When service is limited to one day of the week, it is more difficult, if not unlikely, to get the service provider to cover those missed pick-ups the next day, because the vehicles and crew have moved on to another town. Likewise, during weather related service disruptions, having the service provider in the community one day per week complicates the contractor's ability to recoup service in a timely fashion when the resources are dedicated to other locales. Another common phenomenon of one-day service is for service providers to randomly assign different drivers and helpers to the collection routes each week. Due to the unfamiliarity with the community, misses and other service mistakes are more frequent.

The Borough determined that it was in its best interests to acknowledge the potential for one-day service, but also compare it to multiple route day service by including bid options for each in its new specifications.

### Service and Accountability

The Borough's existing waste and recycling collection contract is written in fairly broad language. It gives the service provider a lot of leeway and control by not providing clarity in how service is to be delivered. This makes it difficult for the Borough to resolve potential customer complaints and conflicts. In addition, it would be difficult for the Borough to object to poor service or determine that the contractor did not live up to the contract expectations.

### Comments

Nestor Resources worked with the Borough Manager to develop procedures for dealing with common customer complaints such as missed pick-ups, contaminated recycling, overloaded or overweight containers and bags. The Borough's new contract spells out in great detail how these issues are to be resolved, along with requirements for education, scheduling, reporting, and customer contact. It also offers measures that protect both the Borough and the contractor

### LEAF WASTE COLLECTION

Although the Borough of Ambridge enters into a contractual agreement with an outside service provider for waste and recycling collection, Borough employees handle the collection of leaf waste, including brush. A scheduled curbside collection is conducted during the fall. At other times of the year, curbside pick-up is provided on-call. Residents have the convenience of contacting the Borough when this service is required and a crew is dispatched to remove the material. This level of service is commensurate with the requirements of Act 101.

### ELECTRONIC WASTE

Since 2013, CDRA banned the disposal of certain electronic discarded items from landfill disposal. The Act provided for extended producer responsibility in which the electronic manufacturers would have to cover the cost of collecting, processing, and recycling the covered devices. Manufacturers were required to submit plans, which demonstrated that 85 percent of the population had access to outlets where they could return their covered devices for recycling at no charge. Because of extenuating circumstances in the marketplace, specifically the lack of markets for glass recovered from televisions and computer monitors, the number of collection points are fewer than anticipated. This causes concern for all municipal officials, who fear that these devices will be illegally dumped. Evidence of that behavior already persists throughout the Commonwealth.

### Comments

In an attempt to find convenient outlets for electronic discards, Nestor Resources explored with the Borough Manager the potential to include the collection of Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) as a new service in their waste and recycling contract. HHW includes items like pesticides, cleaning products, pool chemicals etc. that can pose environmental harm if managed improperly. Electronic discards are often managed as part of HHW programs. After reviewing the costs and the potential to limit competition in the waste and recycling collection bid, other options were considered.

Both Beaver County and the Southwestern PA Household Hazardous Waste Task Force offer collection events on a regular basis. In addition, stores like Staples and Best Buy collect select items during the year.

The Borough has incorporated a franchise fee into its contract specifications. This fee will provide in part some relief for the Borough's costs in implementing periodic collection events for electronic discards and/or removing those items which have been improperly managed throughout the community.

### LOCAL ORDINANCES

The collection contract specifies the service, which must be provided by the contractor. Municipal ordinances, however, provide those same type of directives to local residents and businesses. Both must complement the other if programs are to succeed. The Borough of Ambridge has an existing solid waste ordinance written just after the enactment of Act 101.

### Comments

The Borough's solid waste ordinance covers the basic requirements expected from mandated communities. Residential and commercial waste and recycling is mandatory. It establishes an education program. It provides for the separation and collection of leaf waste.

There are other sections and clauses that should be removed from the ordinance. Local transporter licensing, once allowable under Act 101, has been superseded by the provisions of Act 90, the Waste Transportation Safety Act. These requirements must be repealed from the local ordinance. Many other sections were added in pieces over a number of years. Some sections appear to conflict and the overall document is hard to follow. For clarity and understanding, Nestor Resources is working with the Borough Manager to draft significant amendments, which may result in an entirely new ordinance that is easily understandable.

### Summary Remarks

Overall the Borough of Ambridge has done a good job providing for the waste and recycling needs of local residents and businesses. This project offers several improvements to the Borough's collection contract intended to increase recycling, minimize the incidence of illegal dumping and control costs. It is expected that by implementing these recommendations the Borough will enhance its recycling performance and gain better control of its overall collection program.