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A Neighborly Environment

FACING COMPLAINTS ABOUT NOISE, DUST, TRAFFIC, OR POLLUTION? FOLLOW “GOOD NEIGHBOR” POLICIES TO DE-ESCALATE COMMUNITY CONFLICTS AND REDUCE THE LIKELIHOOD THAT THEY WILL BECOME FULL-BLOWN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ISSUES. BY MEGAN QUINN

Sometimes, the issue starts with a phone call. The neighbors down the street keep hearing loud noises early in the morning, or they complain that metal turnings in the road are causing damage to their tires. “They call the scrapyards and ask, ‘Can you do something about that?’” says Jeff Farano, director of government relations for SA Recycling (Orange, Calif.).

In the past, it might have been easy to dismiss or just pay lip service to isolated complaints. Today, worried or angry neighbors are likely to vent on a community website or to their Twitter followers. And

whether warranted or not, neighborhood concerns can also get magnified through the lens of environmental justice.

What’s environmental justice? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Environmental Justice defines it as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.” It goes on to explain that “*Fair treatment* means no groups of people should

bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies,” and *meaningful involvement* means, in part, that “people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health.”

The EPA’s EJ website makes the point that historically, residents of low-income and minority communities have not had a say in what businesses operate around them, and some such businesses have negatively affected their health and environment. But the definition applies to all communities,



even a newly gentrified one that's emerging in what was once an industrial area. The EPA, other government bodies, and advocacy groups are now more attuned to environmental concerns in every community. In the context of the recycling industry, these common environmental concerns might include noise, emissions, runoff, dust, bright lights, or vibrations from equipment.

Federal, state, and local laws already regulate many of these factors, but complying with all environmental regulations doesn't make you immune to opposition from neighbors and local activist groups, says David Waggoner, ISRI's chief scientist and director of environmental management. Waggoner is liaison to ISRI's Environmental

Recyclers and their neighbors need to talk openly and try to see the world from each other's perspective, says Jeff Farano, chair of ISRI's Environmental Justice Task Force.

Justice Task Force. These groups can have a major influence on city and county councils, state legislatures, and regulators. What might start as a small misunderstanding about noise or dust can escalate into bad press and unfavorable changes to local regulations that require expensive facility upgrades. In a worst-case scenario, your real or perceived impact on your community could face such strong pushback that your operating permits are revoked or you are forced to move your operations.

Scrapyards should keep environmental justice issues on their radar, Mark Reiter, ISRI's vice president of government relations, wrote in a 2015 Political Pulse column for *Scrap*. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggest that waste and scrap recycling facilities are frequently located in or near communities with a high percentage of low-income residents or people of color. If residents of these communities raise concerns that recycling facilities are the source of pollution that can cause serious health problems, it can be an uphill battle to prove otherwise.

Environmental justice can be a touchy subject because of this tension, says Mike James, president and CEO of James Environmental Management (Round Rock, Texas). Take community concerns seriously, even if you think these concerns are unfounded, unfair, or trivial, he says. "Environmental justice is how we behave with our neighbors in the community," James says.

"You can meet all the environmental regulations in the world, but what's the perception in the community?" He and others urge scrap facilities to build good community relationships through communication, openness, responsiveness, outreach, and other neighborly behaviors.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Jeff Farano spends a lot of time thinking about what it means to be a good neighbor. SA Recycling operates 70 recycling facilities in seven states, and many of its yards are near residential neighborhoods or mixed-use areas. Farano, who also is chair of ISRI's EJ Task Force, calls these neighborhoods "hot spots" for possible conflicts because the scrapyard is in close proximity to homes or other businesses, but that doesn't always mean there will be a problem.

In his experience, environmental justice boils down to respect and communication: Recyclers and their neighbors need to talk openly and try to see the world from each other's perspective as best they can, he says. For most scrapyard managers, loud noises, dust, and dirt are just an everyday part of doing business, but neighbors may see them as dangerous or disruptive. "From the outside, scrapyards look intimidating," he says. A cloud of steam might look like smoke, "which can be alarming if you don't know what's going on."

Since the public doesn't always have a good understanding of how scrapyards operate, "we try to run our business so it doesn't have any impact on neighbors at all," he says. That means paying attention to dust that could escape the property, making sure trucks don't track dirt onto the street, and deciding what time of day they run the shredder so they don't wake anyone up at odd hours. "You try to run your business as if you live next door to it," he says.

Most residents who live near SA Recycling yards are used to the ambient noise scrapyards create, so the company rarely gets a complaint unless a resident notices something that seems out of the ordinary, like a particularly loud noise or vibration, he says. In those cases, Farano tells managers to work with that neighbor to find a solution, even if the manager doesn't think the scrapyard is doing anything wrong. "If there's a complaint, in my experience, there's usually something to complain about," Farano says. Neighbors "might exaggerate to make a point, but you still need to take a look and see what you can do." Some fixes are easy, such as the time a manager asked workers to stop



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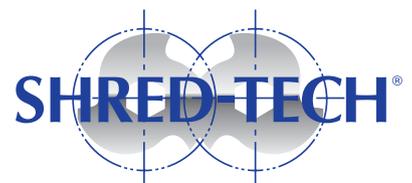
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breaking scrap apart by banging it on the ground with the material handler, he says. In cases where the company can't pinpoint the source of the problem or can't reach an immediate solution, Farano gives the neighbors his cellphone number and asks them to stay in touch.

When a problem seems as minor as a noise complaint, you might be tempted to dismiss it. Be aware, Farano says. "It can mushroom into a much larger problem if you ignore it. ... If your neighbors don't feel heard, they might go and get their other neighbors. They start circulating petitions. They contact their city council members. It starts at the local level and grows from there."

HEARTACHE IN HOUSTON

In late 2012, Houston-area recyclers learned what can happen when community concerns become headline news. After numerous community complaints about nuisance smoke, dust, and odor—about 189 complaints over the course of five years—that seemed to go unanswered, the Houston Department of Health and Human Services conducted an air monitoring study outside five metal recycling facilities to determine whether they were generating emissions that were

Hosting an open house or tour gives you the chance to explain the value of recycling, show neighbors how your equipment works, and field any questions they might have.

harmful to residential neighbors.

Initial results looked alarming: The report stated that the recyclers were emitting hazardous levels of cancer-causing metal particles such as hexavalent chromium. The *Houston Chronicle* published a series of stories about the results with headlines such as "Danger in Air Near Metal Recyclers," which set off alarm bells for both Houston residents and the city's recyclers, Wagger says. National news outlets picked up the story as well.

By then, it was too late to point out that "there were some inaccuracies and incorrect assumptions in the report, and there were some issues with how the data were collected," Wagger says. The hexavalent chromium was detected outside at one specialty recycling facility that torchcuts stainless steel scrap, but "the report seemed to say this sample was representative of everyone," including yards that did not torch stainless steel. Houston recyclers "really felt blindsided by those

articles," says Brandi Harleaux, chief operations officer at South Post Oak Recycling (Houston). Her scrapyards was not part of the initial study, but she and other Houston recyclers worried about how the high-profile news would affect their business.

After the report came out in 2013, ISRI staff members began working with the Recycling Council of Texas to review the data the City of Houston collected and the city's conclusions. They provided more background information to give the researchers a better understanding of how scrapyards operate and how each scrapyard differs in both the material it processes and the techniques it uses to process it. To improve its understanding, the City of Houston revised its air monitoring protocols and collected more data near selected recycling operations. ISRI offered occasional feedback and background information for this process, Wagger says. The research is ongoing, so it's too early to tell what it will show or how it will affect Houston's residents and scrapyards. The 2013 report underscored a painful but important lesson, Wagger says. "The Houston issue made us more aware of operational impacts on local communities and mindful of environmental justice concerns."

BUILDING COMMUNITY

While many conversations around environmental justice involve responding to complaints or crises, Harleaux advocates community-building that focuses on relationships instead of potential problems. "Environmental justice isn't just reacting when something bad happens, it's being proactive and learning your community," she says.

South Post Oak Recycling sits on a corner lot surrounded by homes, businesses, and a church. Harleaux says she has worked hard to build close relationships with those around her yard. "The big thing for us is knowing our neighbors because they're important to us. If you don't already know them, go meet them," she recommends. For the most part, South Post Oak enjoys a mutually beneficial relationship with its neighbors: Before the scrapyard finished constructing its front conference room, the church offered up its office space for meetings, and the scrapyard staff regularly visits the neighboring restaurant for barbecue. These relationships make the neighborhood a nicer place to do business, Harleaux says, and as an added bonus, it helps de-escalate any tensions that might come up. In one case, the restaurant called Harleaux to complain about the noise from scrapyard



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employees who were parking behind the restaurant and hanging out by their cars after work. After she had a quick word with the employees, the problem never came up again. Harleaux believes things could have gone differently if the two businesses didn't have a good rapport. "Instead of someone calling the police, they call us or come over here and we work it out. I firmly believe that is a byproduct of the relationship we previously built, as well as trust."

Jim Lawrence, a longtime stainless steel and yard design consultant and writer for *Fastmarkets AMM*, says it takes time to develop trust within the community, but it can be as easy as patronizing local businesses or hiring employees who live in the surrounding area. It can also mean getting involved with a local service organization, entering a float in the hometown parade, or donating to a local charity. These aren't one-time actions, he says. To be a true part of the community, recyclers have to be willing to maintain those relationships to show they are committed to the community's well-being, he says.

Engaging with neighbors also gives you a great opportunity to educate them about what recyclers really do, he adds. Hosting an open house or tour gives you the chance to explain the value of recycling, show neighbors how your equipment works, and field any questions or concerns they might have. Scrapyards that have regular open houses are likely to learn more about the community and show a commitment to neighbors, he says. Lawrence recommends calling local city council members or other public officials and inviting them on a tour, too. "We made sure we always invited council members and lawmakers to our yard" when he worked for ELG Metals in McKeesport, Pa., he says. Today, he is a city council member for the Pittsburgh borough of Franklin Park. "I wear another hat now and see the value from another perspective. As a public official, my job is to listen to the residents, so when I learn more about them, I can make more educated decisions," he says.

SA Recycling invited city council members to tour its Pomona, Calif., facility in 2017 to help relieve rising tensions with a local community group called Clean and Green Pomona. The group had been raising concerns about numerous fires at trash facilities and pallet yards since 2014, and it had had enough. The group asked the city council to ban any new recycling and trash facilities within city limits, hoping that it might cut down on pollution and reduce trash and dust, local paper the *Daily Bulletin* reported. The city council not only approved the ban, it also considered enacting strict new standards for the city's existing recyclers and trash facilities, Farano says. SA's Pomona facility would have had to enclose its entire operation inside a ventilated building, effectively putting it out of business. After officials toured the scrapyard, learned more about SA's environmental compliance and daily operations, and heard from other city recyclers, the city council scaled back on the new regulations. The city opted for more frequent code enforcement checks, which put some of the worst-offending trash and pallet yards out of business but allowed SA to keep operating, he says. "We really felt we had been lumped together with some bad actors, but by inviting [officials] into the yard, we showed that we wanted to cooperate," he says. "It is important that we educate community and policymakers about the recycling industry. ... Some policymakers don't understand the benefits of the recycling industry, such as the amount of jobs it provides and how much recycling adds to the economy."

IMPROVING YOUR IMAGE

When your neighbors haven't been inside your scrapyard or gotten to know you another way, they form their impression of you from what they see or hear from outside the facility. In his travels across the country as an environmental compliance consultant, James says he sees a lot of potential problems that his clients could avoid

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with a few tweaks. Consider taking a walk around the outside of your facility to scope out possible points of contention, he says. Be on the lookout for trash or dirt on the roads, operations or equipment that might be producing smoke or dust that leaves the facility, and noises that might be unusually loud to nearby neighbors. One scrapyard uses a checklist to make sure the surrounding streets and trucks are clean and presentable.

Road conditions are a common concern for residents, James says. Scrapyard traffic sometimes tracks mud, dust, and small pieces of metal onto the surrounding roads, so keep an eye on their condition, he says. Many scrapyards offer to reimburse neighbors for a flat tire, Lawrence says. "It might cost you \$80 or \$180. The flat might not even be from your scrap, but it doesn't matter. [The gesture] goes so much further than ignoring the problem," he says.

Sometimes that gesture is not enough. When Allied Alloys, a scrapyard in Houston, offered to pay for any flats caused by metal turnings in

the street, its neighbors weren't so happy with the idea. They wanted the metal off the street for good. "We ended up hiring a full-time street sweeper to clean up our neighborhood streets," says Nidhi Turakhia, the company's executive vice president.

Allied Alloys has always been rigorous about its environmental compliance, Turakhia says, but since Houston's air quality report set neighbors on edge, the company has made a more pointed effort to proactively communicate about issues that might affect them, especially dust and smoke concerns. The company voluntarily allowed researchers to take air samples from the border of its property. "We have nothing to hide, and it's important to be part of the research," she says. The company has also reduced its torchcutting operations, changed the hours it torches material, and installed a misting system along the property to capture smoke that might float across the property lines.

James says heavy equipment vibrations are

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another common neighborhood concern. In this case, consider changing your operating schedule so shredders, balers, and crushers operate when neighbors are typically at work or otherwise away from the home. Adjusting the schedule can also help mitigate other possible environmental concerns, such as dust from the shredder, James says.

RAISING AWARENESS

Though Farano, James, and others in the recycling industry are passionate about good neighbor relations, they admit the concept is a tough sell for some recyclers, especially those whose scrapyards are in fast-changing neighborhoods where new homes and businesses are being built ever closer. "There's an attitude I hear sometimes from people who say, 'I was here first, so why should I have to change?' or, 'We've done this the same way for 30 years, and if my neighbors don't like what I'm doing, they should move,'" James says.

Other recyclers "worry that their neighbors will just ask more and more of them," Farano

says, to the point they will find it hard to operate. Still others enthusiastically agree that their business should support their community, but they don't see that as having anything to do with environmental justice. "Some [recyclers] don't even like saying the words because they feel the connotation is that recyclers don't care about people or the environment," Farano says.

ISRI's Environmental Justice Task Force is working to provide members with a toolkit and other support to help them address environmental justice concerns and improve community engagement wherever they operate. The group is in the early stages of gathering ideas and materials for members and is holding ongoing conversations about what environmental justice means for people throughout the recycling industry and the communities where they operate. "Regardless of how [recyclers] feel about it, it's an issue that isn't going away," Farano says. ■

Megan Quinn is senior reporter/writer for Scrap.



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