

Topic 2: Resource Management

Taking care of the trash; L.A.'s chief recycler, Joan Edwards, takes on a pile of work.

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Joan Edwards, a lifelong environmentalist who is director of the City of Los Angeles' Office of Integrated Solid Waste Management, is staking her reputation on a plan which depends on L.A. businesses voluntarily reducing and recycling their trash.

Edwards is the architect of the City of Los Angeles' plan -- expected to be released this week -- to comply with the state recycling law, AB 939. The state law requires that cities divert 25 percent of their trash from landfills by the year 1995 and 50 percent by the year 2000.

Because cities can be fined \$10,000 a day if they don't comply with AB 939, many around the state have adopted strict regulations regarding trash disposal which businesses have not been happy with.

Some have given a single hauler a franchise for the whole city, stopping businesses from recycling their own trash. Others have adopted ordinances for businesses to follow and placed restrictions on what can be dumped in landfills.

"What we are doing nobody is doing," Edwards says. "Nobody in the state did a plan the way we did it."

Edwards' plan is one which gives business and government a "shared responsibility" to recycle without fees or fines or regulations. "We are truly going to say, 'Let's give business a chance to do this in partnership with us,'" Edwards said.

The City of L.A. will provide businesses with technical assistance in finding ways to sell recyclable materials, Edwards said. The plan also calls for the city to help create markets for recyclables, but the plan lets businesses do the work.

"It is a very different way of government doing business," says Felicia Marcus, president of the Board of Public Works. She adds that it is something that Edwards is going to make work.

The plan is already working.

For the past two years, Edwards has been doing the rounds of the big business organizations in L.A., talking to leaders of 22 business industry organizations including heads of the restaurant, grocer and hotel building office manager associations. These groups generate about half of the city's trash, and L.A. can meet the recycling law if they are willing to recycle, Edwards says.

Edwards' plan "is a breath of fresh air," says Leigh Volkland, director of government affairs for the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers, which represents the major movie and television studios in Los Angeles.

Volkland first met Edwards in the fall of 1991, she says. At that time many of the studios were recycling on their own, but Edwards told Volkland about her plan and "Joan Edwards is the one who got us all together."

All the major studios sent representatives to the solid waste management study group and now the studios collectively expect to hit their first goal of recycling 25 percent of their trash this year, Volkland says. The law requires that 25 percent diversion be achieved by 1995.

"We greatly appreciate not being regulated," Volkland says. "We are a creative industry and we like to find our own solutions."

Volkland adds that Edwards is taking "a risk" by depending on business to do it.

But if businesses don't recycle, there is always "the stick," Edwards says. "To have a plan without a contingency is foolish," she says.

The plan calls for studies in the years 1996 and 1998 "to see how we are doing," Edwards says. If businesses are not recycling and not achieving goals, "draconian measures" will be implemented.

These measures, which Edwards calls "the stick," include:

- * banning from landfills certain materials which can be recycled;
- * requiring businesses of a certain size to recycle;
- * forcing businesses to draft recycling plans;
- * requiring all businesses to recycle certain things.

The city will use trash cops and fines to implement the regulations, much like the South Coast Air Quality Management District.

But Edwards doesn't think the stick will be necessary. "If there ever was a time for this plan, it is now."

The will to recycle has never been stronger, Edwards says. And more and more there is a trend to business taking its own initiative rather than waiting for government to regulate it.

"Am I going to feel like I failed if 1996 comes and we have to go the AQMD route?" Edwards asks rhetorically. She shrugs.

If that happens, the big stick will come down and "business gets reminded that we tried to do it their way first."

Besides, Edwards says, if worse comes to worst and she has to find another job, she's not worried. "I was director of recycling for New York City," she says.

Edwards started her career in recycling shortly after volunteering for the first Earth Day in 1970. She quit her job as an elementary school teacher to work for the Environmental Action Coalition, the New York-based non-profit organization which organized Earth Day in New York City as director of educational services.

She worked in non-profit, environmentalist organizations in New York City through the 1970s and was at the forefront of such issues as planting street trees, planting gardens in the inner city and, of course, recycling.

In the early 1980s, after Edwards had adopted a son as a single parent, she felt she wanted more stability in her life and took a job as a deputy director of the City of New York's neighborhood preservation services. It was Edwards' one job that didn't involve environmental issues and only lasted three years.

She became a recycling analyst and then was named the city's director of recycling in 1986.

Edwards was responsible for convincing former New York Mayor Ed Koch to start the first ever recycling program in New York, says Brendan Sexton, former commissioner of sanitation for the city.

"Joan is an unusual combination of a person who is a true believer on the one hand and a competent bureaucrat on the other hand," Sexton says. "She's not a politician, but she understands politics. She gets along with all kinds of folks. She can get along with the environmentalists on the one hand and the folks who pick up the trash on the other hand."

Edwards' New York recycling plan reached 800,000 households a day and collected 560 tons of recyclables by the time she left in 1989. In addition, while in New York, Edwards developed her own market for one of the most difficult recyclables to sell -- mixed glass. She suggested using ground glass to replace sand and stone in asphalt mixtures, and the asphalt with a 15 percent recycled content was used in New York and has been used elsewhere, including Los Angeles.

Edwards decided to leave her job because she didn't want her son, who was becoming a teenager, to grow up in New York City.

Sexton says, "This business about her leaving town for the sake of her kid was an outrageous imposition on the rest of us. But it tells you something about her that is symbolic of Joan."

Marcus says that the City of L.A. "was lucky" to get Edwards. "She's extraordinary. She knows more about the reality of recycling than anybody. She is one of the national pathfinders."

Edwards' plan is just "brilliant" and "cost effective" for both business and government, Marcus says.

The plan is expected to be approved by the City Council this summer. "I think that the council will love the fact that they don't have to impose a heavy burden on business," Edwards says.

The release of the plan's draft is about a year late, partly because the office got started late and partly because Los Angeles' trash is such a huge and diverse problem, Edwards says.

The city of Los Angeles' 3.4 million people and 140,000 businesses produce 12,000 tons of trash a day. The city government controls about half of all trash picked up in its territory.

Business produces about half of all the garbage generated and pays independent contractors to pick up the trash.

For the residential trash and other trash the city controls, the city can implement its own recycling programs, Edwards says.

But business controls its own trash.

Twenty percent of the businesses produce 80 percent of the trash, Edwards says. So her plan can work even if only the largest businesses recycle.

Businesses want to recycle because they can save money on disposal costs and even make money selling recyclables. According to a study of L.A.'s trash flow in 1990, city residences

recycled 9.9 percent of trash while commercial businesses recycled 20.7 percent and industrial businesses recycled 59.3 percent of their waste.

"Businesses are already the best recyclers in the city," Edwards says excitedly during an interview in her office in the east wing of City Hall.

She is a small woman with auburn brown hair who has devoted her life to finding ways to divert garbage. Articles about her have hailed her as the "garbage queen" and she is first woman ever to be featured on the cover of Waste Age magazine.

When you ask her why is she so interested in garbage and recycling, she says its partly because of the era in which she grew up. "I liked environmental issues. They were hot. They were new."

Her mother was a journalist who wrote and edited a weekly paper on Long Island. Edwards says she wanted to be an activist like her mother, but wanted to do something that was her own.

"I grew up in a family which embraced every cause and said, 'Go and fight for it,'" Edwards says.

"I am most definitely a risk-taker."

Snapshot

Joan Edwards

Native of: Bay Shore, Long Island, N.Y.

Resident of: Westchester

Age: 49

Education: B.A. Liberal Arts, Adelphi University, Long Island, N.Y.

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