

## **DIRECTOR'S UPDATE**

**Dan Scott, District Waste Coordinator**

2009 has been a year of many financial and operational challenges we have not faced before in the ten years I have been in the Solid Waste District. We knew budgets were going to be tight as the economy slowed down and moved into recession, but we never imagined how severe it would be. Market prices for our commodities dropped 75% in a two month period in late 2008 which in turn led to us having to lay off 40% of our staff in early February; stockpiling upwards of two hundred tons of processed material until market prices rose enough for us to recoup some sort of value; sending co-mingled non-fiber recyclables to outside vendors for processing; not being able to keep up with the volume of material being received; and ultimately temporarily closing our eight fulltime and six part-time drop-off sites around the county on May 1st.

It seemed like our world was caving in and the harder we worked the more problems arose. As the year unfolded, I don't think anyone would have guessed how severe and far reaching this recession would be. In retrospect, even though the decisions I made early in the year to reduce staff and later to temporarily suspend drop-off collections were painful and unpopular, I am glad they were done as quickly as they were. Facing severe cash flow and subsequent operational problems, if we hadn't done what we did when we did it, there is a very real possibility we might not have been able to survive and stay operational at all.

We knew the markets would come back up eventually which they have done, although very slowly. We also knew that after we curtailed the flow of recyclables for a time that we would be able to get caught up on our processing and clear out the stockpiled materials so we could function efficiently once again, and we have. The markets have moved to levels that are not great, but are at levels where we can at least cover a good portion of our operating costs. The other positive note is that our collection tubs were out of service for only a month and a half. When they went back out in mid June we had reconfigured the collection sites to include three new locations (Ashland County Service Center on State Route 60 at the former Heartland Home location, Mifflin Fire Department on State Route 603 in Mifflin and Troy Township Garage on US Route 224 in Nova). We also changed each site to a dual stream collection process with two tubs at each site. One tub is for fiber material only, and the other is for co-mingled #1 - #7 container plastics, tin cans and aluminum cans. Switching to a dual stream collection has helped us greatly reduce the amount of sorting we have to do, which is critical to the operation, so we can effectively process the material with the reduced staff we have remaining.

It has been gratifying to me, even in these tough times, to see how dedicated our citizens are about recycling. The activity at our drop-off sites returned almost immediately upon them reopening with little or no advertising, and has steadily increased over the last five months. Commercial and industrial recycling has been moving along,

although at reduced levels given the economic slowdown, but we look for that to increase in the months ahead as the economy slowly recovers.

With the changes we have made to our operation we will be able to continue to offer a wide range of recycling services to residential, commercial and industrial clients throughout Ashland County. We expect commodity prices to continue to improve and, as long as they don't drop severely, we should be able to generate sufficient revenues in the months ahead to keep our budgets balanced. We will be able to continue operating with the staff we have remaining and those staff levels, including restoring hours previously reduced in all but one position, are adequate to handle the volumes we presently have and allow for continued growth in the months ahead.

Our drive-thru drop-off and buyback operation has remained strong all year and we are working on making that easier for people to use. In late November we extended the drive-thru hours by 4 hours per week by opening at 8:00 am on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. Also effective January 7<sup>th</sup> we will be open from 8:00 am until 4:00 pm on Thursdays for our customer's convenience. This is a major change for us since the drive-thru has never been open to the public on Thursday's since it opened over twenty years ago. Thursday has always been our day to catch up and also do a thorough cleaning. But after doing a review of our operational needs compared to offering increased service availability to the public, I felt we needed to make a change. Moving from 28 to 40 hours availability per week will make it easier for people to utilize our drive-thru service and make better use of our resources at the center.

All in all, even though the Ashland County government operations in general still face financial difficulties, I am cautiously optimistic that the worst is behind us here at the Recycling Center. We are poised to move forward with continued good services and a wide range of programming for managing the solid waste we all generate while operating within the financial resources available to us.

As always, if you have questions, comments or need clarification or help with any recycling or disposal issue, please feel free to call me at the Recycling Center at 419-289-7382 or stop by our offices at 1270 Middle Rowsburg Road. I wish you a Happy New Year and remember, KEEP RECYCLING!