

Eco-Cycle's Roots Run Deep in Boulder County

On the eve of Eco-Cycle's 40th anniversary celebrations, Executive Director Suzanne Jones sat down for a chat with long-time board president Allyn Feinberg to take stock of the nonprofit recycler's successes and the challenges ahead.

Pushing the Boundaries

Would Boulder be Boulder without Eco-Cycle or vice versa? Probably not was the conclusion we reached and that's a good thing. Feinberg, who served on Boulder City Council and Boulder's Recycling Authority before joining Eco-Cycle's board in the late 1990s, describes the nonprofit recycler as "always pushing the boundaries of environmental sustainability."

Zero Waste Starts with Grassroots

Eco-Cycle is often credited with coining the term "Zero Waste," which is now part of the lexicon of sustainability.



Eco-Cycle uses reconditioned school buses to move recyclables.

But long before the buzz words, Feinberg remembers the schools buses jam-packed with newspapers and other recyclables rolling through her neighborhood, and the open-air transfer station, which was basically a big parking lot. "It was a real mess when it snowed," she said.

"But locals were deeply committed, and that's how the Eco-Cycle volunteer network got started," she said. "Eco-Cycle's volunteers, which were block leaders back then, still do an amazing job educating their neighbors and communities."

The Revolution Begins

Those visionary volunteers helped jumpstart the recycling revolution. Things took another quantum leap forward when voters approved a ballot measure to fund construction of a materials recycling facility in Boulder County. Eco-Cycle spearheaded the campaign in favor of the multi-million dollar publicly owned facility, which prevailed. The Boulder County Recycling Center opened for business in 2001 and last year processed 52,000 tons of recyclable aluminum, cardboard, plastics, and paper.

"Having a publicly owned recycling center and adding single-stream collection were game changers," Feinberg said. "The whole community was now invested in recycling, and people who maybe hadn't taken recycling seriously before, started to do so. Plus being able to process recyclables locally paved the way for more curbside collection programs across the county."



Around the same time, Eco-Cycle was working through the conundrum of what to do with the hard-to-recycle stuff – everything that was left after you pulled the aluminum cans, glass, paper, and cardboard out of the trash bin. That cogitating led Eco-Cycle, in partnership with the City of Boulder, to establish the Center for Hard-to-Recycle Materials (CHaRM) in 2001 – the first facility of its kind in the nation, which now collects roughly 3 million pounds of hard-to-recycle materials annually.

And then there was climate change....

Feinberg, recalling the report *Stop Trashing the Climate* that Eco-Cycle co-authored nearly a decade ago, said, “Eco-Cycle was one of the first to see the critical role that Zero Waste solutions can play in addressing global climate change.” The report concluded that “significantly decreasing waste disposed in landfills and incinerators will reduce greenhouse gas emissions the equivalent to closing 21 percent of U.S. coal-fired power plants.”



At the Paris climate talks last December, Zero Waste advocates had a seat at the table for the first time, and Zero Waste is gaining recognition as a top-tier climate solution strategy that is especially attractive at the city, county and state levels.

“Another exciting development on the climate front is new research showing the value of composting as a way to store huge amounts of carbon in soils,” she said. As usual, Eco-Cycle is at the forefront of efforts to do just that in Boulder County.

Building Community

But the real story behind Eco-Cycle’s successes lies with the people of Boulder County. “Eco-Cycle has a long tradition of working to change the world for the better, starting with the grassroots,” she said. “Eco-Cycle has always been about building community through Zero Waste whether it is business, schools, government, neighborhoods, or public events, our work touches everyone. If your community is behind you, then you can accomplish anything.”

Thanks to the enduring partnerships with communities throughout Boulder County, Eco-Cycle is now carrying Zero Waste solutions statewide with a Zero Waste Colorado campaign and nationally and internationally with Eco-Cycle International and its newest website. www.ecocyclesolutionshub.org

