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Telling the ‘whole story’ of recycling at the Philadelphia Recycling Industries Congress

PHILADELPHIA—One of the accomplishments of the recent Philadelphia Recycling Industries Congress was to present a complete picture of how both sides of the private-sector recycling industry have come together to forge a mature business model that is making economic contributions to the city and the state as a whole.

“In the past, the supply and demand sides of the industry went their own ways and told their own stories separately. We didn’t always do a good job presenting the complete picture, the whole story,” said Tim O’Donnell, president of the Pennsylvania Waste Industries Association (PWIA).

“The recycling congress in Philadelphia was our way of making the point that both sides of the industry are in sync and are now working together,” said Robert Bylone, executive director of the Pennsylvania Recycling Markets Center (RMC). “Now we’re presenting the complete picture. We’re telling the whole story of how recycling has matured into a sustainable and profitable business.”

PWIA and the RMC jointly sponsored the daylong Philadelphia Recycling Industries Congress on April 14 in City Hall.

PWIA represents the supply side of the industry—the larger companies in the waste industry that collect and process recyclables and are investing heavily in new facilities and technologies. For example, Waste Management and Republic Services, both national companies with a strong presence throughout Pennsylvania, attended the Philadelphia Congress on behalf of PWIA.

The RMC works more so with the demand side—companies that use recycled materials and are looking to expand markets for products made from recycled materials. Among the companies the RMC invited to the congress were Re Community, a materials recovery facility; Kuusakoski Philadelphia and Eforce Compliance, both electronics scrap processors; Revolution Recovery, a demolition waste management and recycling company; and Two Particular Acres, a producer of organic compost and mulch.

“Recycling was once considered the province mainly of environmentalists. Now, however, the private sector is driving growth,” O’Donnell said. “With the recent addition of a Waste Management single-stream recycling plant that just opened in Philadelphia, private companies have now invested more than \$87 million in new recycling facilities and technologies in Pennsylvania in just the last several years.”

“Meanwhile,” Bylone said, “the number of companies finding new uses for recycled materials is rapidly expanding and driving job growth not only in Philadelphia but also statewide.”

The Philadelphia recycling congress was a spinoff of the first-ever Pennsylvania Recycling Industries Congress, held on Feb. 15 in the Capitol in Harrisburg.

“The success of both of these events is something altogether new in our experience,” Bylone said. “There’s a new level of awareness of recycling as a for-profit business out there.”

O’Donnell echoed that sentiment. “There was a day when you took only a waste bin to the curb for pickup,” he said. “Now you take a waste bin and a recycling bin, and often the recycling bin is the heavier of the two.”

According to a PWIA study, the private-sector waste industry contributes \$3 billion a year to the Pennsylvania economy and accounts for 31,500 jobs. A study by the Northeast Recycling Council found that 3,800 establishments in Pennsylvania connected to recycling or reuse and remanufacturing generated 52,316 jobs with an annual payroll of \$2.2 billion.

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