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Lowell Folk Festival Recycling Program

In the 20 years since its inception, the free Lowell Folk Festival has become the largest event of its kind. With a waste diversion rate of 95 percent, the festival is recognized as a national model for recycling at large-scale special events.

Facts-at-a-Glance

- More than 200,000 people attend the three-day Lowell Folk Festival each year.
- The Lowell Folk Festival received the Massachusetts Recycling Coalition's 2004 Institutional Recycling Award for making an outstanding contribution to recycling in Massachusetts.
- The program's diversion rate skyrocketed from 0 percent in 1999 to 90 to 95 percent in 2003.
- Approximately 130 volunteers support the program each year, working four- to five-hour shifts.

“If we (the National Park Service) are not out in front leading by example, then who will do it?”

- Ted Davis, Lowell National Historical Park Facility Manager



Program Overview

First held in 1987, the annual Lowell Folk Festival draws more than 200,000 people to Lowell, Massachusetts, for the last weekend of July. Together, the city of Lowell, the Lowell Festival Foundation, Lowell National Historic Park (National Park Service), and the National Council for the Traditional Arts organize the festival. Six performance stages, along with various food vendors, nonprofit exhibitions, crafts, and a family activities area, are scattered throughout the downtown area. Although festival organizers recognized an incredible opportunity for waste reduction at this event, the festival's large size posed quite a challenge for a recycling program.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

Nuts and Bolts

To ensure the greatest possibility of success, organizers carefully planned and implemented the festival's recycling program in several steps:

- In 1999, a contractor performed an informal waste assessment by interviewing vendors and visually observing trash can contents. As expected, most of the waste consisted of polystyrene food and beverage containers, as well as plastic food service items such as straws and plastic utensils.
- In 2000, program organizers placed approximately 100 44-gallon recycling collection bins next to trash cans. Signs with words, pictures, and directional arrows were bolted to the side of each collection bin. Organizers also established a central recycling center where materials were sorted and loaded onto trucks for recycling.
- In 2001, festival organizers introduced a pilot composting program. Vendors were no longer allowed to dispense plastics, such as plastic utensils and straws, with food items; instead, organizers provided vendors with compostable cornstarch utensils free of charge.
- In 2002, full-scale recyclable and compostable materials recovery went into effect.

Including the Public and Community

Public and community participation is essential to the success of any recycling effort, especially one as large as the Lowell Folk Festival. Event organizers invite public and community participation by:

- Recruiting volunteers from the community (see text box at bottom for more details). Calling participants and organizations personally to ask them to return in following years has yielded positive results.
- Encouraging families to participate by joining the recyclables sorting team. Kids who help may take an "I promise to recycle" pledge and receive a "Recycling Team" button.
- Creating an interactive education center in association with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. More than 25 recycling and composting films are shown throughout the festival. In recognition of their support, recycling program sponsors also receive a free booth in the education center.
- Asking local businesses—in person—to avoid the use of plasticware. Unlike vendors who are on a contract with the festival, organizers cannot require businesses located nearby or inside the festival grounds to sign a contract discouraging the use of plastic utensils. But organizers still have had overwhelming cooperation from local businesses they spoke with directly.

Volunteers

Volunteers are an essential element to the festival's recycling program. Two months before each festival, planners advertise for approximately 130 recycling volunteers. At the start of the volunteers' shift, organizers give them maps of the festival area and briefly explain their duties. The festival is divided into four- to five-hour shifts with 15 recruits working each shift.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

Volunteers serve in specific roles:

- **Recycling Captains:** These volunteers, who have recycling program experience, coordinate the efforts of all volunteer positions. Recycling captains also troubleshoot any problems and coordinate bin emptying efforts with runners via cell phones.
- **Vendor Captains:** Organizers recognized that it would be difficult for vendors to collect recyclables during peak business hours. To solve this problem, vendor captains regularly stop at vendors' stations and collect their recyclables. Vendor captains drive golf carts for fast and easy transportation.
- **Recycling Collectors/Runners:** These volunteers drive golf carts to different collection locations. They empty full containers, load bags onto the carts, and bring the bags to the recycling center for sorting.
- **Recycling Processors:** These volunteers are stationed at the recycling center and sort through the bags that the volunteers drop off.

Recycling program organizers provide all volunteers with "Lowell Folk Festival Volunteer" t-shirts. Children who volunteer also receive hats.

The YWCA Summer Youth Program, Lowell Boys & Girls Club, and community churches provide event volunteers each year. Program organizers thank each of these community groups with a \$1,000 donation. The YWCA has helped the festival's recycling program since the beginning, so it also receives the profits from the collected beverage containers—which total approximately \$800 each year.

Recruiting Volunteers

The Lowell Folk Festival organizers find volunteers in a number of ways:

- Internet message boards and the Lowell Folk Festival Web site
- Local newspapers and periodicals
- Word-of-mouth
- Local youth groups, community groups, and nonprofit organizations

Contacting each participant and organization personally by phone to ask them to return in following years has yielded very positive results.

How It's Done

Gloved volunteers sort materials collected from commingled collection bins, as well as remove and dispose of contaminants and excess liquid. Processors push the materials into hauling trucks stationed at the end of sorting tables.

Other volunteers sort compostable materials. These volunteers move all food and compostable serving items into the hauling truck and remove noncompostable items for either recycling or disposal.

Composting

Composting at such a large event can be difficult due to contamination problems and the types of food served. Program organizers address this issue by requiring vendors to use only compostable or biodegradable serving utensils when serving food. For easier compliance, program organizers supplied vendors with compostable utensils—free of charge—for the first two years of the composting program. Festival organizers now sell vendors compostable utensils at half price. However, to “close the loop” and achieve environmental benefits, these utensils actually need to reach the compost bins. Runners empty vendor-area trash cans and bring them to the recycling center, where processors sort the contents. Program organizers then send the compostable utensils and food waste to a commercial composting facility, so all food waste, including meat and dairy products, can be composted.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

The recycling coordinator retrieves the resulting compost one month before the next festival. Most of the compost is sent to the city of Lowell and the Lowell National Historical Park for landscaping. Organizers bag the remaining compost to give to festival attendees as souvenirs. Attendees are fascinated that the food waste they produced at the previous year's event can fertilize their gardens the following year.

Vendors and Concessionaires

Vendors and concessionaires are integral to a successful recycling program. Folk festival organizers contractually prohibit them from dispensing nonrecyclable items, such as polystyrene food and beverage containers, or snack bags.

Funding

While the Lowell Folk Festival receives some financial assistance from the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, the primary source of funding comes from sponsorship, including:

- *Monetary donations.* Many local businesses, such as grocery stores and retailers, often are eager to support community events.
- *Service donations.* Local haulers may be willing to provide free service for an event.
- *Product donations.* Local businesses often welcome an opportunity to contribute to their community by donating items such as hats, t-shirts, and compostable utensils.
- *Advertising.* Empty space on recycling bins provides an opportunity for local advertising. This space can be purchased or given to businesses to thank them for monetary, service, or product donations.
- *Grants.* Nonprofit organizations and state governments sometimes provide financial assistance in the form of grants and partnerships.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

The Bottom Line

Since its inception in 1999, the recycling program has:

- Recycled 144,007 beverage containers.
- Composted 165,000 meals (weight equivalent).
- Distributed 9,300 bags of compost to attendees.

“If we could make it happen at the Lowell Festival, we could make it happen anywhere—there are 250,000 to 300,000 people! If we could do this here, my god, we’re setting up a model for the rest of the country.”

- Pat Scanlon, Lowell Folk Festival Recycling and Composting Program Coordinator

Challenges and Solutions

- **Challenge:** Discouraging those who scavenge for aluminum cans and plastic beverage bottles at the festival to exchange them for money.
Solution: Volunteers empty collection containers frequently—before they are full—to deter scavenging.
- **Challenge:** Ensuring vendor compliance with festival requirements.
Solution: Organizers insert a “no plastic” clause into vendor contracts. Providing vendors with free compostable utensils the first two years of the program encouraged compliance.
- **Challenge:** Changing the recycling habits of both festival attendees and vendors.
Solution: Organizers make recycling easy and obvious by placing collection bins next to every trash can and attaching signs with words, pictures, and directional arrows to the bins.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

Reasons for Success

- Festival organizers support the recycling program and make it easy for vendors to recycle.
- The recycling program is designed by someone with significant recycling experience.
- Program expenses are paid for by sponsorships.
- Community members and organizations volunteer for the event.
- Bags of compost from the previous year’s festival remind attendees that food waste, when composted, can be useful.



Photo courtesy of Lowell Folk Festival

The Lowell Folk Festival Web site can be found at <www.lowellfolkfestival.org>.

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