

**“It’s our duty as good citizens to recycle, but at the El Cerrito Recycling Center that duty is a pleasure.”**

-- Daphne Reimer, East Bay Express, 1991, “The Best of the East Bay”



Angela Foster was only 2 when she visited the Recycling Center’s Book exchange in 1993. From the start, the center was as much about community as it was about commodities. Photo by David Toerge, West County Times archive

# Where Recycling is a Pleasure

A history of El Cerrito’s pioneering recycling center  
from 1972 to 2012

By Dave Weinstein

*This history was written in 2012 for the city of El Cerrito as it prepared to rebuild its Recycling Center. It served as the basis for a movie about the center, and was “published” online but without photos or footnotes. The Historical Society is making it*

*available now because it is a solid history of the Recycling Center. We have not updated the text, though some pictures post-date the opening of the center.*

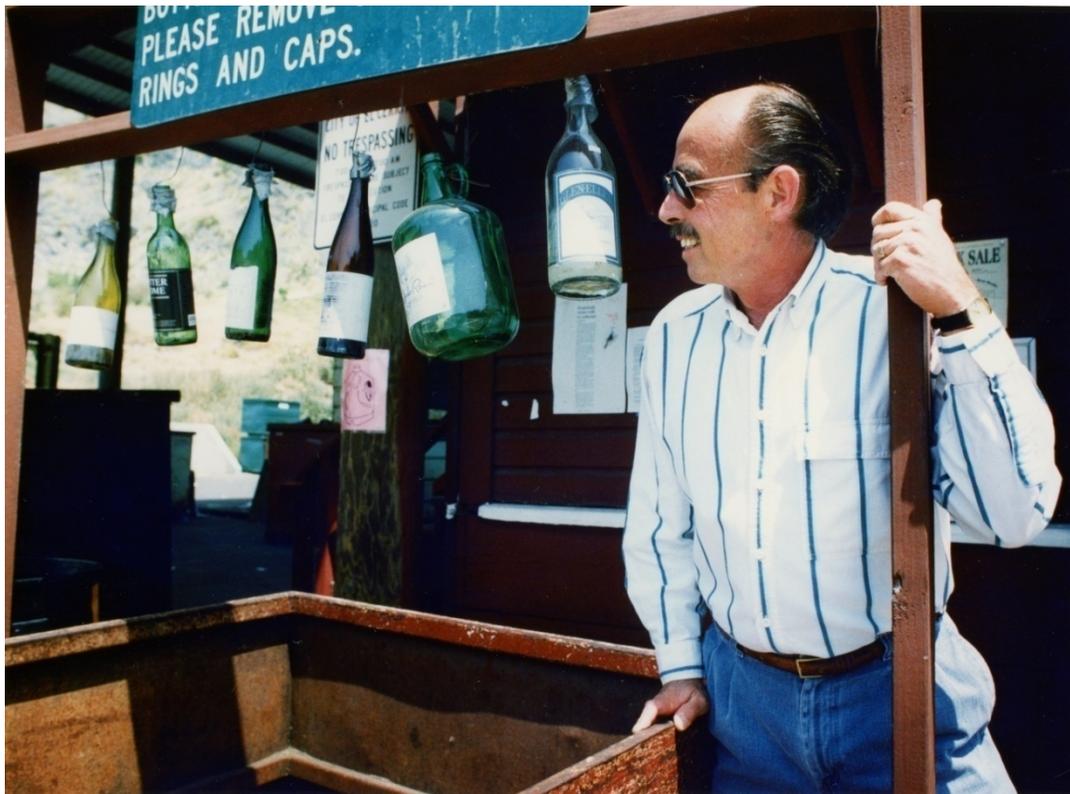
It was early 1972 and Nixon's henchmen were plotting to break into the Democrats' stronghold in the Watergate. The O'Jays "Back Stabbers" was on the top of the charts. Senator Strom Thurmond called for deporting John Lennon because of his anti-war antics.

El Cerrito voters were turning down a plan to build high-density housing on the site of a former Chinese orphanage. And at UC Berkeley, a Vietnam vet was lurching along Strawberry Creek, toes in the water, pointedly avoiding the protesters mere blocks away, "all yelling and screaming and doing crazy stuff." **1**

Also very much on people's minds was the environment – a new concept for most. America had celebrated its first Earth Day only two years before, the same year the Environmental Protection Agency was born. And in the Bay Area, people were following the efforts of a brand new agency whose goal was to save the bay from being paved over with factories, housing, airports – and garbage dumps.

### **Talking about recycling**

Some people in El Cerrito, a mostly middle class city of 23,000 people just north of Berkeley, got to talking – including Ken Little, a Cal student and El Cerrito Park and Rec commissioner, the guy with his feet in the water.



**The center may have been started by volunteers** from the community, but from the start they knew it needed the full force of the city behind it for the center to succeed. That full force came in the person of Joel Witherell, the city's parks and recreation director. Photo by Mark DuFrene, 1992. West County Times archive

“It was our thought if you could get the public programmed or trained to do recycling at home,” he said in a recent interview, “there would be a groundswell from We the People up, to get a bigger involvement in recycling.”

Another participant, Virginia Rice Mason (she was Virginia Rice at the time), recalled in a recent interview: “The idea originated with a number of us, and one of them was me. We sat around a table and were talking about why shouldn’t we have a recycling center instead of every can and bottle being thrown in the dump, which offended us.” 2

It was Little who came up with the group’s name, “E.C. ology,” he recalled, “just because it was kind of catchy and it also told you what you wanted to do and it kind of went with El Cerrito.”

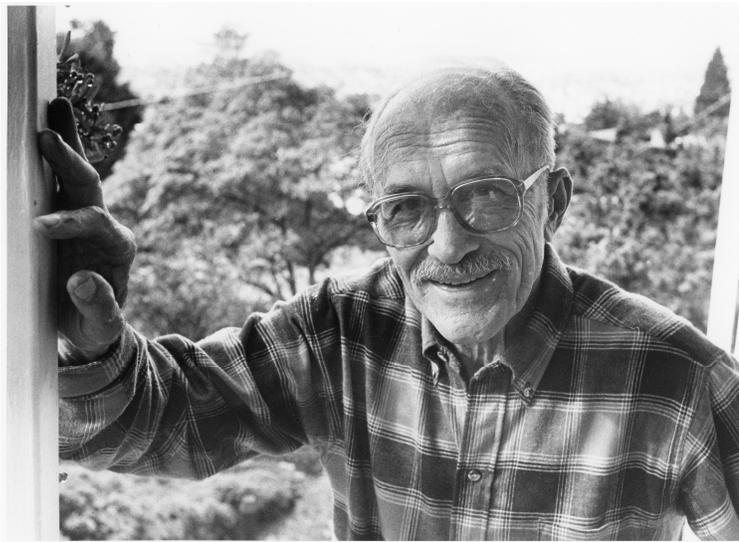
Much, though not all, of the talking took place among members of the El Cerrito Democratic Club, an active group, very liberal, that had the ear of the City council – even though the majority of councilmen were Republicans. 3

Among the plotters was Kelly Falconer, a member of the Native Plant Society. “She was on our case all the time about putting native plants in the parks and the Hillside Nature Area,” then-mayor Rich Bartke recalled in a recent talk. 4

There was Rice, formerly in the foreign service, where she served in Berlin during the Airlift. 5. Soft-spoken, “just a joy to be around,” Bartke says, an active campaigner for the Democratic Club, Rice wrote about battles between the “environmentalists” and “developers” in town for Freedom News, an alternative paper. 6

Perhaps the feistiest of the group was Nancy Gans, who became so successful at recycling, the story goes, that she received “a special dispensation from (paying for) garbage collection, because she had none -- she recycled everything.” 7. Gans, an advocate for seniors, got her start “recycling” even earlier – using tin snips to turn tin cans into Christmas ornaments at the senior center. 8

Gans was also the founder and longtime organizer of El Cerrito’s Earth Day celebration.



**Art Schroeder**, seen here in later years, was a hard worker and smooth talker. West County Times archive

The smoothest talker among the group was said to be Art Schroeder. “The Mouth,” Rice called Schroeder, a former teacher and federal housing official who lost his job during the McCarthy red hunts of the 1950s and became one of West Contra Costa’s top advocates for open space and senior housing. <sup>9</sup> “He was very loquacious, he could express himself very well,” she said in a recent interview. “We all said things (about recycling) but he did the best job of it. And the city council was open to the idea.”

They were indeed. As Bartke recalls it:

“A group came to the city council and said we want to start a recycling center. We said that’s never going to work. They said, ‘No, we just need a little piece of ground and a couple of hundred bucks on loan. We’ll pay it back and we’ll do all the rest.’ And that group was called E.C. ology.” <sup>10</sup>

The site they asked for was at the end of Schmidt Lane, where the El Cerrito flatlands hit the steep hills, a former stone quarry that, ironically or not, had for years served as a dump for household paints and other toxic and miscellaneous wastes collected first by the fire department and then by the city’s garbage company during spring and fall citywide cleanups of “old paint cans and things that could cause fires.” <sup>11</sup>

It was a beautiful setting for an industrial use, surrounded by the city’s Hillside Natural Area open space, often visited by deer, and smack in the geographic center of town, not hidden in some other-side-of-the-tracks industrial hinterland.



**In the early days volunteers crushed cans** by rolling right over them. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“(Little) argued that the recycling center would pay for itself,” Bartke said. “The reaction on the city council was pretty much unanimous that this would never work but

he wasn't asking for very much so let's give these folks an opportunity to try. It won't cost much to try." 12

It helped that E.C.ology had one of its own on the council – the newly elected Gregg Cook, “a very articulate and bright young man,” in Bartke’s words, a communications consultant for Pacific Telephone who served on the Park and Rec Committee and “was sort of a go-to guy when you needed to get things done.” Cook became “our youngest mayor” in 1974.

As Cook recalled, it was Schroeder who managed his council campaign, with Rice, Falconer and other would-be recyclers walking precincts – none with more dedication than Nancy Gans who, after falling off one stoop and breaking a leg, urged the apologetic homeowner to make amends – by finishing up her precinct walking.

“Nancy and Art and Virginia and Kelly kept saying to me we’ve go to do something more with recycling,” Cook recalled. “So that became part of the campaign that we wanted to do.” 13

Almost anything they did would have been more than what was already being done. “Salvaging,” as it was then called, had fallen out of fashion long before, Clyde Figone recalled in a recent talk. 14

“The reason they were called ‘scavengers’ is because they scavenged through the garbage,” said Figone, whose father founded El Cerrito’s garbage company, East Bay Sanitary, in 1940, and who ran the company for years before passing it on to his own son. “They had their own recycling, they had their own bottle companies, they had their own rag companies. They had a business through recycling.”



**A volunteer crushes glass** with a sledgehammer during the early days of the very hands-on center.” El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

But once stores stopped requiring deposits on bottles, and as landfills increased in size and dumping became cheap, it no longer made economic sense to scavenge, he said. “The truck went to the landfill. That was it.”

For a time, much of El Cerrito’s garbage was burned, as was garbage everywhere, until air quality laws outlawed trash burning around 1960.

At the landfill, workers for Richmond Sanitary Service did sift through the garbage to remove the easily salvaged, valuable materials. And Boy Scouts mounted periodic paper drives.

But until 1970, when a nonprofit in Berkeley opened a small drop-off center, “recycling,” as it soon came to be known, was almost unknown in the Bay Area – or beyond. **15**

### **Smashing glass**

On August 5, 1972, however, recycling came alive in El Cerrito with the opening of the E.C.ology drop-off. Thirty-three people brought in bottles and cans on the first day of operation. The center was open the first and third Saturday mornings of the month. **16**

“People came on the first day, it was pouring down rain,” recalled Little, who shared opening day duties with one other volunteer, Chris Devlin, a young man who worked in Chevron’s tax department. “They didn’t want to get out of the car. It was muddy. We’d go to the cars and take the stuff out and deposit it in barrels. I would break the glass up with a sledgehammer.” **17**

E.C.ology, surprisingly enough to members of the city council, was an immediate smash. On October 7, 250 people brought materials. Sales of materials were so strong E.C.ology began to pay some of its teenage bottle smashers -- \$2 an hour. **18**

For El Cerrito, it was the start of something grand. More than a recycling operation, it became a love affair. No. It was better than that. It became a marriage of the best sort – a till-death-do-us-part kind of thing.

Over the decades, folks in El Cerrito have adopted the center – volunteering there, starting new programs, hauling in their cans and bottles by car – even after the city started sending trucks to collect those items curbside. And once the recycling center installed shelving for used books, it became something of a literary salon.



**Bibliophiles** go through the Book exchange in 1993. West County Times archive

“Collectors turn recycling hub into a hangout,” the West County Times headlined in 1993. “Like ‘Cheers’ it has a cast of regulars and a constant flow of interesting extras.”

“It’s really interesting to look out the window,” the center’s then-manager, Susan Kattchee told the paper, “and see 15 people sitting in the magazine bins. It’s like a coffee klatch.” **19**

Over the years, surveys have identified the center as one of the most popular services provided by city government.

And the drop-off center has helped put El Cerrito on the map as one of the few places – El Cerrito Plaza shopping center, the Down Home Music record store, the Cerrito Theater, Contra Costa Civic Theatre, Sunset View Cemetery, and Nation’s Giant Hamburgers – that draws outsiders to town in large numbers. It’s a good bet people have bought homes in El Cerrito after being introduced to its charms while dropping off plastics.

In 1994 when the city considered closing the center, as it has several times though never altogether seriously, Ken Pisciotto, the chairman of a city committee appointed to consider the center’s future, suggested it wouldn’t happen.

“My wife just about crucified me the other day when I said we were looking at an option that would close the drop-off,” he told the Times. **20**

Rumors of closure have circulated, however – though not among the general public, which would have been horrified. When Becky Dowdakin ran the recycling center in the late-1990s, she said, the city manager told her the center would close, its employees laid off or given jobs elsewhere. **21**

Why after all should El Cerrito operate its own city-run center? Very few cities do. And recycling had gone mainstream, with every garbage company under the sun picking up curbside.

### **Rebuilding a state-of-the-art recycling center**

But the city never did close the center. Instead, it's rebuilding it, spending \$2.8 million on a project that includes a circular drop-off area that for the first time will fully separate customers dropping off materials from roving forklifts. There will be a prefabricated building for offices and education; educational displays, areas for environmental events, and native plantings.

The center will also greatly expand what people can drop off, adding just about everything – building supplies, torn clothing, plastics of every kind, electronics, packing peanuts and more. The goal, said Melanie Mintz, the city's environmental services manager, is to be a "one-stop shop." 22

The center will allow volunteers to set up native plant exchanges, or toy exchanges, said Garth Schultz, the city's recycling manager. "The world is our oyster in what we can do out there." 23

Architects Noll & Tam promise to achieve the highest rating for green buildings – LEED Platinum – producing a facility that produces as much energy as it consumes and recycles or reuses 80 to 100 percent of its water.



**Hundreds of people** attended the ceremonial opening of the newly rebuilt recycling center on April 22, 2014. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Why is the city spending so much money on such a project in an era of shrinking governments? And why is the city continuing to run curbside collection using city workers and trucks, especially when East Bay Sanitary says it would love to take on that chore?

In some ways, the answer is easy.

The new center, City Manager Scott Hanin said, "can do what in my opinion makes the most sense, focus on the hard-to-recycle stuff, the stuff you can't typically put out at curbside."

“People are always going to want to bring material whether it’s collected at curbside or not and we will always provide that opportunity, but the focus is how can we get to the next level?” Also, as Hanin noted, folks in town want the center to remain.

“During my time here,” he said, “it became clear to me pretty early on that the recycling center was an integral part of the city for a lot of reasons, not just recycling. Even on the social level.” **24**

And, over the years the city has determined it would neither save money nor improve services by privatizing its recycling nor by merging with regional recycling efforts.

Also, Mintz said, construction costs will come not from the city’s general fund but from the recycling center’s enterprise fund, which derives from a surcharge on garbage bills and sales of materials.

But this explanation raises more questions. Sure El Cerrito loves its recycling center. But why? Other cities have had recycling centers too, some city-run, more run by non-profits, most of them long gone. Why is El Cerrito’s still here? And how, over all these years, did El Cerrito make it work?

And why in El Cerrito, an innocuous little city that most people in the Bay Area don’t know much about?

And is El Cerrito recycling really as historically important as the tales say? Was it the first? The best? A model for recycling centers nationwide? Was El Cerrito as important as is often claimed – or does it just seem that way to its proud denizens?

Unlike Berkeley, whose non-profit drop-off center, that started in 1970 and served as a kind of parent to El Cerrito’s in the early years, El Cerrito was not a university town. Not really. Though many UC Berkeley professors lived in town, as did many students, and as did Clark Kerr, university president from 1958 to 1967. Kerr’s wife Kay helped found Save the Bay, the grassroots organization that halted the rampant filling of San Francisco Bay by leading to new state laws and the creation of the Bay Conservation and Development Commission.

(It was the success of Save the Bay, by the way, that stimulated many environmental activists to get involved with recycling, several early E.C.ology members said.)

Most of the nation’s earliest recycling programs got started around universities – Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and Davis, in California, and perhaps the earliest, in Madison, Wisconsin -- 1968.

### **E.C.ology starts recycling**

The people who started E.C.ology included some students, and some who had recently been students. But the early volunteers were a varied bunch.

Ernie Del Simone, who began as a laborer at Chevron’s Richmond refinery and wound up as a lawyer in the corporate office, voted to authorize the center as a member of the City council. After Cook, Del Simone became its strongest council supporter – with his muscles as well as votes – slamming away at bottles weekend after weekend, along with his son, David. The barrels used for glass crushing came from Chevron, thanks to Del Simone. **25**



**Founders and early participants** in the recycling program included Ken Little, Denise Polk, Chris Devlin and Franciszka Diemont. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“I remember many hours with big goggles crushing glass in different barrels,” Cook said. “In those days you had to sort the glass, you had to take the labels off, you had to take the labels off the cans, you had to tie up the newspapers in little neat bundles so they could be thrown in bins to be hauled away.”

About 15 people served on the board of E.C.ology, which functioned not as a separate non-profit but under the umbrella of Piedmont Recycling and Environmental Education Project (PREEP), which despite its name was based in Berkeley and ran recycling there. PREEP did the initial marketing of materials; soon E.C.ology took that over.

Little, who worked for the city as a recreation supervisor, putting on teen dances, among other chores, soon got some of those teens to help out. Some did more than smash glass. Franciszka Diemont, a young woman from the city’s Youth Council, emerged two years later as the center’s on-site manager. **26**

Soon the volunteers were joined by people working off traffic tickets or misdemeanors. “It was probably Rich Bartke or Ernie Del Simone who got a local judge to send people who had to do community service to us,” Little said, adding, “We treated them all the same whether they were on probation or working there.”

At first the center only accepted cans and glass, but soon it began taking newspaper, building a shed to keep it dry. **27.** Later the center began accepting whole wine bottles for reuse, selling them to a firm named Encore.

Almost from the start, the city played an important role in overseeing E.C.ology, providing not just the site but help in grading the muddy lot.

Throughout the early years, support on the city council for E.C.ology was unanimous, even though the council often split on other issues. “I don’t remember any one person on the council who was adamant against (recycling),” says Ken Berndt, the most

conservative member of the council. “At that time the flavor in El Cerrito was, ‘Let’s get it going.’ ”

“It may be because Ernie and Gregg and Rich were in favor,” Berndt said. “You had three members of city council in favor and they were popular guys.” **28**

E.C.ology began as a “pilot study” in August with 100 families being invited to participate. The pilot program earned \$90, selling material to PREEP. The study was to determine whether recycling could pay for itself. By September 1972, Mayor Bartke announced, the answer seemed to be yes. **29**

“Recycling in El Cerrito appears to be a paying proposition, if the results of the present pilot study are accurate,” he wrote, adding, “The city council will discuss whether to go directly into a full operation and cut short the pilot study, using the proceeds to hire student help to run the collection center.” The council decided to open the program to all comers.

And by October, City Manager Richard Brown was contacting the firm Owens Illinois for an alternative to sledgehammers. **30**

Their cheapest bottle crusher could be had for \$930 – apparently too much because soon a young mechanical engineer named Allan Gardiner got a call from two of his friends, George Ferrell and Chris Devlin.

“They asked me could I help. ‘We’ve got wine bottles, we’ve got gallon jugs.’ ” They wanted Gardiner to design and build a glass crusher. “ ‘We just want to throw stuff in the top of it and get broken glass out the bottom that we can compact and send off.’ ”

“I said I guess I could do that.” **31**



**Allan Gardiner**, who built the glass crusher, and George Ferrell toss in bottle, circa August 1973. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

It was E.C.ology's first move into high tech and Gardiner built it on the street in front of the Kensington home where he still lives, overlooking Sunset View Cemetery.

"It was a big steel box with a few arms in it that were star-shaped and they were welded to a shaft and there were plates in the glass crusher that were kind of fingers in between the arms," he said, "and there wasn't enough room for a whole bottle to get through."

Chevron donated the steel. Gardiner donated his time. Del Simone, dubbed "father of the glass crusher," convinced the council to contribute \$400 for other expenses. By the time it arrived at the center, complete with ribbon-cutting, the center had just delivered 15,000 tons of smashed glass to Owens Illinois. **32**

And in early 1974, ceremoniously, Little handed the City council a check for \$400, "a return of funds loaned by the city for construction of the glass crusher." **33**

On January 1, 1973, in the Mayor's State of the City Report, Bartke said the center "has proven quite successful and is now about the biggest in the area."

"Surprisingly, the center is not only paying all its own costs, including minor salaries to the helpers, but is showing a slight profit for future expansion." **34**



**Two volunteers** move a barrel of crushed glass in, 1975.  
El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

At first, recycling was a foreign concept to many people in town. E.C.ology did what it could to spread the word, through the city newsletter, local papers, and churches and neighborhood groups. E.C.ology ran educational programs at the city's Community Involvement Center.

In early 1974, E.C.ology offered a \$10 prize for a new logo for the center. J. W. Ringbom was the winner and his design was used for years. The center distributed a bumper-sticker proclaiming "I Recycle in El Cerrito." And that fall, the youth football league had its "Castro Raiders" picking up trash in the Hillside Nature Area, depositing recyclables at the center. **35**

"I think the big push came when we did in cooperation probably with the city and probably with the garbage company and with the Boy Scout troop a citywide pickup of newspapers," Little said. This one-time event was the center's first foray into curbside service – one that would not become a regular service until 1977.

An even bigger push came when Joel Witherell became the city's parks and recreation director, working for \$1,240 a month, at the start of January 1973. **36.** "He really embraced the recycling center," Cook recalled.

While the city hired Witherell to run its parks – and it had several new parks to run, following a successful "Pennies for Parks" bond campaign – his interest in recycling may have been in his favor.

As recreation director at University of California Santa Barbara, Witherell worked with students who wanted to start recycling. "We had some land loaned to us and some funding from Bank of America, so I learned a little about recycling," he said. **37**

Recycling came up during Witherell's job interview. "Gregg was mayor at the time and he really supported (recycling). So ... that was one of the things he asked me. Could you help organize (recycling) in the future if there is any grant money?"

At first, Witherell served as liaison between the city and E.C.ology, but his role soon grew. The Northern California Recycling Association was getting started at this time and Witherell joined. He was president for several terms, and for a number of years NCRA met at the city's senior center.

Witherell, who served El Cerrito for 20 years until he retired in 1993, first as parks and rec director then as community services director, proved to be "the best of all combinations to look for in a public servant," according to an editorial in the West County Times, "a visionary with his feet on the ground." **38.** No one did more than Witherell to keep recycling going in El Cerrito.

In a paper for an environmental psychology class, Franciszka Diemont described what the center was like in late 1974 and early 1975: A bit messy ("many individuals have mistaken it as a kind of dump"), in a beautiful site, with friendly workers who dealt with occasional vandalism. A recent arson cost them 35 tons of newspaper.



**This view of the center** from 1975 shows its improvisational nature. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Diemont also worried that not everything E.C.ology did was beneficial, noting that the recyclers had no control over what the recyclables were used for. “For instance, a year ago, the aluminum that E.C.ology sold to a particular corporation was recycled to be used as an element in a strip-mining process that is at this moment scarring the Colorado countryside.” **39.**

By the mid-1970s, as volume of material and work increased, it got to be a bit much for volunteers. The stalwarts were departing, Devlin at the end of 1973, Little in mid-1975, Ed Rhodes, Mark Young, and Denise Polk later that year. **40**

The idea almost from the start, Virginia Rice Mason said, was that E.C.ology would get the program going then pass it on. “We thought we should pin it on the city,” she said. “That would be the best way to stabilize it.”

By 1976, the Oakland Tribune reported, the old quarry had become “one of the busiest and noisiest spots in town.” **41.** In its three years, E.C.ology had processed 818 tons of glass, 6.4 tons of aluminum, 50 tons of steel, and 348 tons of newspaper – and tonnage was growing. **42**

Geoff Hill, a young man from the Rochester, N.Y. area who was studying Chinese, then community health education at San Francisco State, began volunteering at E.C.ology in 1975. He became manager within a year or two. It became clear, Hill said in a recent phone interview, that for the program to significantly increase volume, it had to become city-run.

“I talked to Joel about it and he thought it was a great idea,” Hill said.



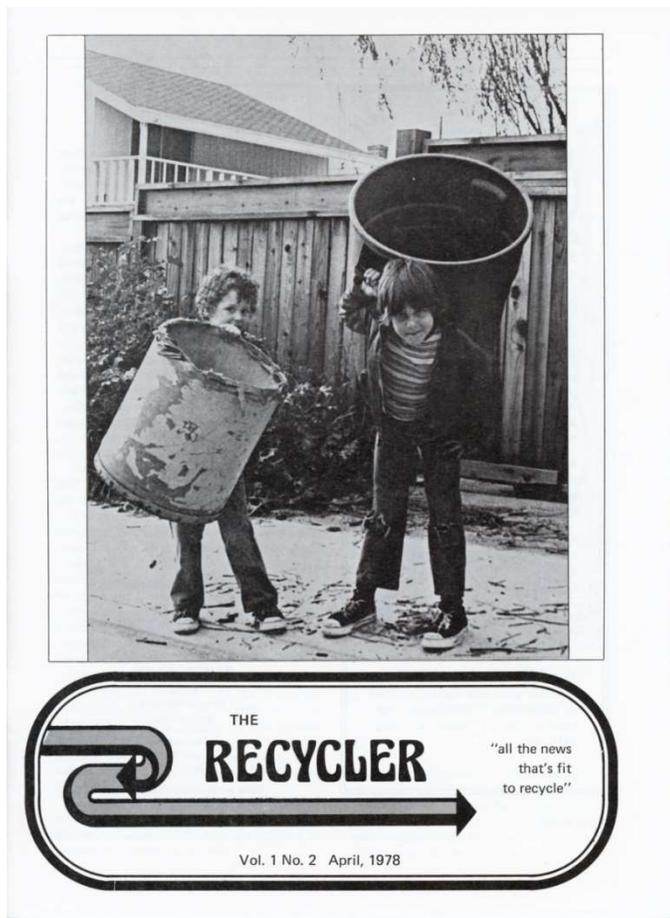
**Workers take a break** between their shifts at the recycling center. Many ‘volunteers’ came via the county to work off infractions. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“It was interesting,” he said, “because there was one guy, I can’t remember his name, one young guy, and he did not want us to expand. He was against it. He just liked the comfortable every-other-Saturday kind of operation.” All the other volunteers welcomed the city takeover, Hill said. **43**

#### **E.C.ology expands hours, moves to curbside**

The idea of recycling was spreading. Berkeley, Palo Alto, Davis, and Modesto had recycling programs that predated El Cerrito’s. Several communities in Marin started programs soon after El Cerrito’s.

Contra Costa County developed a solid waste plan in late 1976 that also called for recycling – all of 7 percent of the waste stream. In El Cerrito, the only community in the county with significant recycling, folks were not impressed. The city council voted to reject the county plan, saying 25 percent would be a more appropriate goal, and a Citizens Solid Waste Committee was formed to create a more aggressive solid waste plan for El Cerrito. **44**



**The Recycler** was part of an ambitious goal to spread recycling throughout the region. April 1978 issue.  
El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

The chairman, Chuck Papke, a young man who would go on to become a professional recycling consultant, vowed to boost volume to 25 percent by starting a regular curbside collection modeled on Berkeley's Recovery pickup.

On January 1, 1977, a Saturday, E.C.ology was open to collect not just cans, bottles and newspapers but Christmas trees, cardboard and paper bags. Plus, from now on it would be open every Saturday, not just twice a month. **45**

E.C.ology volunteers and waste committee members hashed out plans for curbside collection. Garbage was still collected from people's backyards and the recyclers knew that wouldn't work for recycling.

"Coming up with incentives for a large number of residents to carry their recyclables from the yard to the curb may prove the biggest problem we'll face," Papke noted. Clyde Figone, the garbage hauler, suggested that along with curbside collection of recyclables should come curbside collection of garbage – a change East Bay San would not achieve until 1997. **46**

By May 1977, the city council was talking about making E.C.ology a city program. "This step may be necessary but needs more study," city manager Richard Brown

warned, citing costs and staffing. He also worried that the Environmental Quality Committee the council was appointing to advise them on recycling and similar issues, “might start with a built-in bias” towards city takeover. 47

He was right. The Environmental Quality Committee’s first chair was Nancy Gans.



**Nancy Gans.** West County Times archive

The city’s takeover of E.C.ology was the decisive moment in the recycling center’s history, as important as opening day. Relatively few cities have ever run their own recycling centers, and although many volunteer, non-profit groups have run recycling centers, few of those have lasted to the present.

Familiarity with the program made the leap easier, said Bartke, who was mayor at the time. “We had by that time some experience with the volunteer operation and we knew what the markets were and who the companies were that would purchase the goods. So we had a decent idea of what kind of a budget we needed to run it with paid people,” he said.

“I wouldn’t say there was broad opposition,” he said. “There was some. There were a few people who questioned whether the operation would pay for itself. There was also questions from the neighborhood about having trucks running up and down Schmidt Lane and Navellier (Street). But I think the overwhelming feeling was that it’s a good thing, we ought to be doing it even if others are not doing it, we ought to.”



**The center attracted a steady stream of recyclers. They carefully chose the proper buckets for each item. 1977. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive**

East Bay Sanitary, which could have objected because of its franchise to collect garbage in town, did not, and in fact cooperated with recycling efforts. Clyde Figone attended many early meetings with recycling proponents.

The council did not want to spend general fund money on the center – and it didn't have to.

Witherell was talking to a longtime recycler from Davis about how to avoid that. Richard Gertman, who began recycling as a student at UC Davis in 1970 and helped start a curbside pickup there in 1974, was now working for the California Solid Waste Management Board. The board had a plan for reducing the amount of garbage shipped to landfills – compost it and use the compost to build Delta levees.

“It was kind of a crazy idea because compost doesn't make great levees,” Gertman said in a recent interview. Instead, Gertman proposed funding pilot projects in recycling. The board approved a grant for \$90,000 for a “curbside source separation demonstration project.” 48. Then Gertman noticed what E.C.ology was doing.

Gertman suggested that Witherell apply. He advised Witherell on the grant application, then approved it in June – but only for \$45,000. Santa Rosa got the rest. Gertman liked El Cerrito's plan because it was “municipally sponsored and it seemed to be building towards a sustainable program, one that would continue.” 48



**By the late 1970s** the E.C.ology Center had taken on a much more professional look, with roofing over the bins and an adjacent book exchange. 1977. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

### **Fast growth once city takes over**

The city took over operation of E.C.ology on July 1, 1977 with the goal of eventually recycling 25 percent of the city's solid waste. The name E.C.ology remained.

Thanks to the grant, says Geoff Hill, who went from volunteer to paid staffer overnight, E.C.ology "really took off. It was fantastic. We expanded everything. We developed curbside vehicles. We decided to go curbside residential in El Cerrito. And we expanded the drop-off center to six days a week."

Nor was Hill's salary paid for by city funds. Instead, it came from the federal government through CETA (the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act). Papke was also hired through the program. State grants and CETA would continue to subsidize E.C.ology through its early years.

Later in 1977, the city got a second state recycling grant for \$90,000, bringing the amount to \$135,000. The grants paid to pave the site, buy equipment, buy a large pickup truck and build an open-sided pole barn that was to remain ever more precariously in place until mid-2011. **49**

The pole barn, which covered 6,000 square feet and stood 20 feet tall, cost \$20,000 and took six days to complete – by a contractor, despite original plans for E.C.ology volunteers to build it themselves. **50**



**The pole barn** provided a large covered area for processing of materials. December 1978. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Changes came quickly. Within weeks of the takeover the center was open five days a week, not two. Kaiser Aluminum opened a buyback operation onsite, “Can-Do”, paying 3 cents a pound for aluminum cans. **51**. Kaiser had earlier suggested setting up a can buyback center of its own on San Pablo Avenue, the city’s main drag, but the council said no because the location was bad and it would compete with E.C.ology. **52**

In July, Mayor Bartke reported, “It is almost embarrassing but El Cerrito is finding itself as a leader in the field of solid waste management in California,” noting how little the city had really done. “But no one else, except Modesto or Berkeley, have done anything.” **53**

During the summer of 1977 the city surveyed residents to gauge interest in curbside recycling. Twenty percent of residents responded and almost all said they wanted to take part. E.C.ology spent \$119 on door hangers telling people how to recycle, distributed by fleet-footed volunteers.

Glass and metal should go into separate containers, magazines should be tied and bundled. Lids needed to be removed from jars and placed with cans, which should be flattened. Newspapers should be tied no more than 12 inches high. **54**

“We bought one truck to test the process and had that truck converted to haul six bins,” Witherell said. “Those six bins would then be able to be lifted up by a forklift, taken over and rotated into large bins. That was our test program.”



**A worker from the East Bay Conservation Corps** helped run the center in the late 1970s. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“We need a commitment from approximately 1,000 residents in El Cerrito to raise the final amount of funds necessary to meet the initial start-up expenses,” the city wrote to residents. **55**

The goal was to get people to subscribe – for \$1 month. Once half the homes in town sign on, the city suggested, revenue from sales would eliminate the need for any fee. **56.** “The original thinking was, we could make it be self-supporting,” Witherell said of curbside collection. He later learned otherwise.

“By September 6, the first day of service, 418 homes had subscribed at the \$1 per month rate.” **57**



**It was heavy work** – stoop, lift, and dump – for drivers in the 1970s as the curbside program expanded. October 1977. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Observing the grand day was Oakland Tribune reporter Ann Bancroft, who rode the truck with driver Joanne Morrow, who was also the center’s bookkeeper, and employee Richard Cruz.

“It took a little driving for the center’s salmon-colored truck and trailer rig to spot the carefully sorted materials in front of homes,” Bancroft wrote. Morrow used a “city map marked with dots showing subscribers’ homes,” but pickings were sparse. In the north of town, there was one pickup for every other street. Even some subscribers had empty curbs.

“Maybe they just forgot because it’s the first day,” Morrow said. **58**

El Cerrito’s curbside collection was only the sixth to get going in California, according to a state Solid Waste Management Board report from 1976. Modesto came first, in 1971, followed by San Anselmo and Davis (1974), San Luis Obispo and Downey (1976), then El Cerrito – followed four months later by Palo Alto.



**Curbside collection started out small.** El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

**E.C.ology buys materials at the center**

The second grant, Witherell said, “included money to get a buyback program. We wanted to do three elements of recycling, curbside, drop-off and buyback. Those were the three ways of gaining the material, gaining the support of the community, to make this as easy as possible.”

By the start of December, the Richmond Independent headlined, “El Cerrito plan working.” Can-Do, which had been taking in 1,200 pounds a month of aluminum at the start, was now taking in 12,000.

“Some of the cans come in covered with dirt, which indicates people have been going along roadsides and parks to get them,” Papke, who was running E.C.ology, told the paper, adding, “Some groups have been bringing in 300- to 400-pound volumes of aluminum every week and earning well over \$50 amounts.” **59**

In July 1978 the buyback began paying for newspapers, bottles and tin cans too, in a program called Cash for Trash. **60.**

“We were the only center that I knew of, I believe in the whole country, that was a multi-materials buyback center,” said Geoff Hill, who was driving the truck and sorting at the center. “I mean at one point we were buying not only aluminum cans, we were buying cardboard, tin cans, glass, we were buying all the stuff, from the public.”



**The Recycling Center was on a roll** in the late 1970s.  
 El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“You’d drive up next to the scale, take the bags off,” he said, describing the buyback. “The scale itself was like a four-foot-square platform scale, slightly elevated. There would be someone there to help. You’d take the bags off, they’d inspect the bags, put the bags on the scale, weigh them up.

“Then you’d put the cardboard on the scale, weigh that up. Then they had a place to dump it nearby. Then the newspaper, weigh that up and dump it.

“Then it would be figured, so many tons, pounds, so many dollars per ton for newspaper and cardboard. So many cents per pound. Then you’d get paid for all that. You’d either get a check on the spot or if it were really small you’d get cash. But mostly it was a check on the spot.”

Checks were printed automatically on an Apple II computer. **61**

E.C.ology had become industrial. Hill said there were three drivers, two forklift operators, “and one backup, and sometimes we had two forklifts going.” And that was just the operations staff.

The drop-off and buyback center was open seven days a week, with a 14-foot conveyor with magnetic separator for aluminum, plus an aluminum shredder.

Gertman, who was pleased with how El Cerrito used the state grants, recalled how the center crushed its cans: Laying them out between two railroad ties and rolling over them with a small steamroller.

Volunteers came from the community and others were assigned by the courts. The state Department of Rehabilitation recognized the center as a job-training site, so disabled people worked there too, sometimes six or seven at a time, with special supervision.



**An E.C.ology curbside truck** arrives at the center. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

### **Boom times for E.C.ology**

Volumes soared. By the start of 1978, 600 homes were subscribing for curbside pickup, the city was a third of its way towards its 25 percent recycling goal, and revenues were exceeding expectations. **62**. In April, after East Bay San sent notices of an “introductory rate” – six months of curbside for \$4.25 instead of \$6 – another 50 families signed on. **63**

Also that year, the city offered subscribers 6- and 10-gallon plastic recycling containers “labeled with attractive decals for glass, paper and cans,” available at cost “in sets of avocado, chocolate or yellow.” **64**

By mid 1978, E.C.ology was employing not just a public information coordinator (David Tam, who spent much time on advocacy and lobbying) **65**, but a community awareness coordinator, Karen Lazansky, both through CETA. In March, E.C.ology published the first issue of the Recycler, (“All the news that’s fit to recycle”), edited by Nancy Steidtmann. The center was employing about 10 CETA employees in 1978. **66**



**In the early days** of the curbside program, participants improvised, using whatever containers were at hand. The city later provided its own green buckets. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Witherell became a strong advocate for regional recycling. And Tam was working on state legislation to fund recycling and require deposits on beverage containers. Mayor Dick Spellman asked the county Board of Supervisors to create a countywide recycling program, with El Cerrito supplying its expertise. The supervisors all shook their heads yes – but nothing came of it. **67**

Besides collecting curbside in El Cerrito, by 1979 E.C.ology trucks were serving Kensington and Albany. **68**. For a time, El Cerrito sent trucks to Pinole, Hercules and other West Contra Costa County cities on weekends to serve as mobile drop-off points. **69**. The three trucks, modified pickups with bins in the rear, were “in continual disrepair.” **70**

In May 1978, as part of its grant agreement with the state to boost participation, the subscription fee was dropped. Cans no longer needed to be flattened nor newspaper tied. Business boomed. Drivers gathered 7½ tons on the first free pickup day – an amount that

used to take two weeks to collect. 71. E.C.ology was earning \$8,000 a month from sales – almost double what it earned a month before.

Up to ninety people a day were visiting the center from as far away as Concord, San Leandro and Fairfield. Sandra Gauthier of El Sobrante and her children happily received \$6.89 for 157 pounds of material; Joy Badgley of Berkeley walked away with 62 cents.

72



**Recyclables go flying** as a collection truck dumps at the center, late 1970s. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“It got a little complicated. I’m telling you it was a crazy operation,” Hill said. “It got a little crazy. We just had so much going on.

“Let’s say on a Friday, we’d have the curbside people picking up. They’d be coming in, they’d have to get unloaded by a forklift. We’d have people coming in to sell their stuff. They’d come in at another line, another gate at the center. Then we’d have the drop-off bins out front for other people who’d come and donate their stuff. And they had to be emptied out too.

“Plus we would pick up from some Berkeley stores too, right in the city. We had all these aspirations going at the same time so, yeah it got too crazy.”

Some neighbors agreed.

William Miner and Carl Long were among a group of neighbors who asked the council to pull E.C.ology’s permit because it was an “inharmonious land use.” Although the center occupied an old quarry surrounded on three sides by rock-faced cliffs and the city’s Hillside Natural Area and facing the city’s corporation yard, there are homes a few hundred yards away, both along the street leading to the center and on one low hillside nearby.



**Trucks and station wagons** back up as they sell recyclables at the buy back.  
El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“Cars were (lined up) past Navellier all the way down...” Witherell said. “There was heavy traffic, papers blowing out the back of pickup trucks, cans dropped on the ground.”

The issue before you, the city manager told the council, is “should E.C.ology continue or be terminated?” **73**

Witherell came up with a third alternative – ship the buyback operation to an industrial section of Berkeley (at Second and Gilman streets, where it still remains) while keeping E.C.ology alive as a free drop-off only, plus the curbside collection. A Berkeley non-profit took possession of the state-owned equipment.

Witherell’s idea had saved the center from possible closure.

#### **Who should pay for recycling?**

Volumes plummeted after the buyback closed, but Witherell was consoled because he believed the same amount of recycling was still happening – but now in Berkeley. To make up the difference, E.C.ology increased its commercial recycling and recycling at apartment houses, he said.

Witherell continued advocating for regional recycling, proposing a West County program that involved permanent satellite drop-off centers in five communities with a large recycling center at or near the Richmond landfill. **74**

In 1983, at Witherell’s urging, the council sought to stabilize E.C. ology’s funding by creating an enterprise fund separate from the city’s general fund to hold revenues from material sales, and receipts from a new 40 cent per month mandatory surcharge on garbage bills. **75**

The idea that recycling can support itself on sales of materials alone has long been abandoned in the industry – despite early optimism. “It never could survive on the revenues from the sale of the recyclables by a long shot,” said Becky Dowdakin, who

became the city's "integrated waste management program director" in the late 1990s and today is Oakland's solid waste and recycling program supervisor.

"We are providing a service that benefits everyone in the city," Councilman Dick Spellman said. **76** He argued that without recycling, the Richmond landfill would soon be filled; its closure would require trash to be hauled great distances, causing garbage bills to skyrocket for everyone. **77**

Recycling saves everyone money, Witherell argued, despite out-of-pocket costs and the need for a subsidy. He told state officials in 1983 that the city spent \$3 to subsidize each ton of recyclable materials; sending that material to the dump would have cost many times more. **78**

But many opposed the fee, including many of the city's seniors. Opponents called it a 'stinking tax' and a number refused to pay it. "I don't think it's fair that half the people in town that don't recycle have to pay for it," Councilman Howard Abelson said. "I personally like the program and use it. It makes sense for me because we save another garbage can." **79**

Tom Padia, who came at this time to E.C.ology as assistant manager ("but really I was a route driver"), says, "As an environmentalist my attitude would be, 'You don't want to recycle, you should pay more.' But that wasn't the prevailing sentiment at the time." **80**

In late 1984, on the 3-2 vote that was common on this ideologically split council, the mandatory fee was killed even though Witherell said its loss would put recycling in jeopardy and both the city manager and Environmental Quality Committee suggested keeping it mandatory. Instead, the council instituted a 50 cent per month voluntary fee. "Most people will pay the fee," said Councilman Bob Bacon, who voted against the mandatory fee. **81**



**Jean Siri**, seen at a meeting of the City Council.  
West County Times archive

Both council members who voted to retain the mandatory fee had been involved with recycling, Jean Siri as a member of the E.C.ology board in 1976 and Chuck Lewis as an initial member of the Environmental Quality Committee. (Siri, one of the Bay Area's

leading environmental activists, later suggested that recycling be mandatory in El Cerrito.)

Norman La Force, a lawyer and environmentalist who later served on the city council, predicted E.C.ology's demise: "The trio of mayor Howard Abelson, Bob Bacon and Gregg Howe... have begun the process of terminating El Cerrito's innovative and successful recycling program." **82**

As it turns out, Bacon was half right. About half the city's residents paid the voluntary fee, "and it raised the same amount of revenue," Padia said. During Padia's 16 months at E.C.ology, he said, volume continued to grow curbside.

Tellingly, when recycling manager Susan Kattchee proposed re-instituting a mandatory fee just a few years later, in 1989, "it didn't end up being very contentious."

"We had made so many improvements in the program that people were seeing the benefit of it," Kattchee said in an interview. "... We didn't get a big fight on the fee." **83**

A few years later, Dowdakin recalled, the recycling fee was added to commercial garbage bills as well.



**Newspaper** bound for the recycling center is picked up curbside. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

### **Manning the trucks**

By the mid 1980s, Witherell said, "Everybody seemed to be recycling. You'd drive down the streets of El Cerrito and everybody had their bottles and cans and newspapers stacked."

Throughout its history, Witherell said, the center benefited from having a dedicated workforce, often college-educated people "who wanted a hands-on experience." "The kind of person who worked there really felt proud of what they were doing," he said.

A remarkable number of El Cerrito’s recyclers got their start recycling at universities, from Witherell himself to current manager, Garth Schultz. It’s also noteworthy that most of the people, industry-wide, who developed the field got their start tossing bales and driving forklifts.

Recycling was increasingly becoming mainstream, with standard philosophies and techniques developing nationwide, and with new equipment slowly being made available expressly for recycling. It was no longer necessary to jury-rig farm equipment.

But through the mid-1980s, recycling remained hard, sometimes back-breaking work. Padia remembered what curbside collection was like in the early 1980s. He drove “modified, heavy duty pickups with special steel-frame beds with steel bins that were fork lifted on and off.

“There were two tall bins with cut-outs in the side right behind the cab for newspapers, those were the larger volume ones that we’d toss the bundles of newspapers up into. We had a couple of lower bins for glass that could be loaded from either side, and the back ones for metal cans, aluminum and steel.

“You would move from stop to stop, set the brake, jump out. They were not low-entry or dual drive the way curbside trucks are today. You’d open the door, get out, go pick up the material, throw it in, get back in.”



**Jose Jaramillo**, a longtime employee at the recycling center, runs the forklift, circa 1990. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Things hadn’t changed much when Jose Jaramillo, today the center’s lead worker, arrived in 1986.

Besides the rigors of the route, workers spent much time sorting materials. The purer the stream, the more money the city would receive. “We had to separate everything,” Jaramillo said. “We had bins for broken glass, bottles, newspaper and white paper, because we used to sell everything separate.” **84**

“To separate for quality of paper, you had to use some acid to make sure it’s the right paper,” said Mario Gonzalez, the center’s operations supervisor, who began working for the city in 1990 and became a full-time recycling employee in 1994. “Being here for a while, you break a piece of paper you know the quality of the paper by the fiber.” **85**

Sorting was time-consuming work, Jaramillo noted – but its costs were subsidized by using court-ordered “volunteers” and disabled trainees. “We used to separate so much stuff and the city was making a lot of money from separating everything,” he said. “But most of that was free labor.”



**Mario Gonzalez**, another longtime employee, sports his Recycling T- shirt circa 1990. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Recycling operated at that time with up to seven drivers, plus two managers in the office, Gonzalez said. He and Jaramillo are the only two recycling workers who remain from the late 1980s and early 1990s and Gonzalez understands why.

“Some workers moved to other jobs. Back in the days it was very physical, you know, for all of us. Some people had knee problems, shoulder problems, a lot of lifting. And some workers thought about moving on.”

The job could be dangerous. No trucks ever crashed or rolled down El Cerrito’s nearly vertical Moeser Lane.

But, Jaramillo remembered, “In those days we had a lot of problems with people dumping asbestos and some other chemicals,” he said. “I didn’t know much about certain things. I was afraid about my health.”

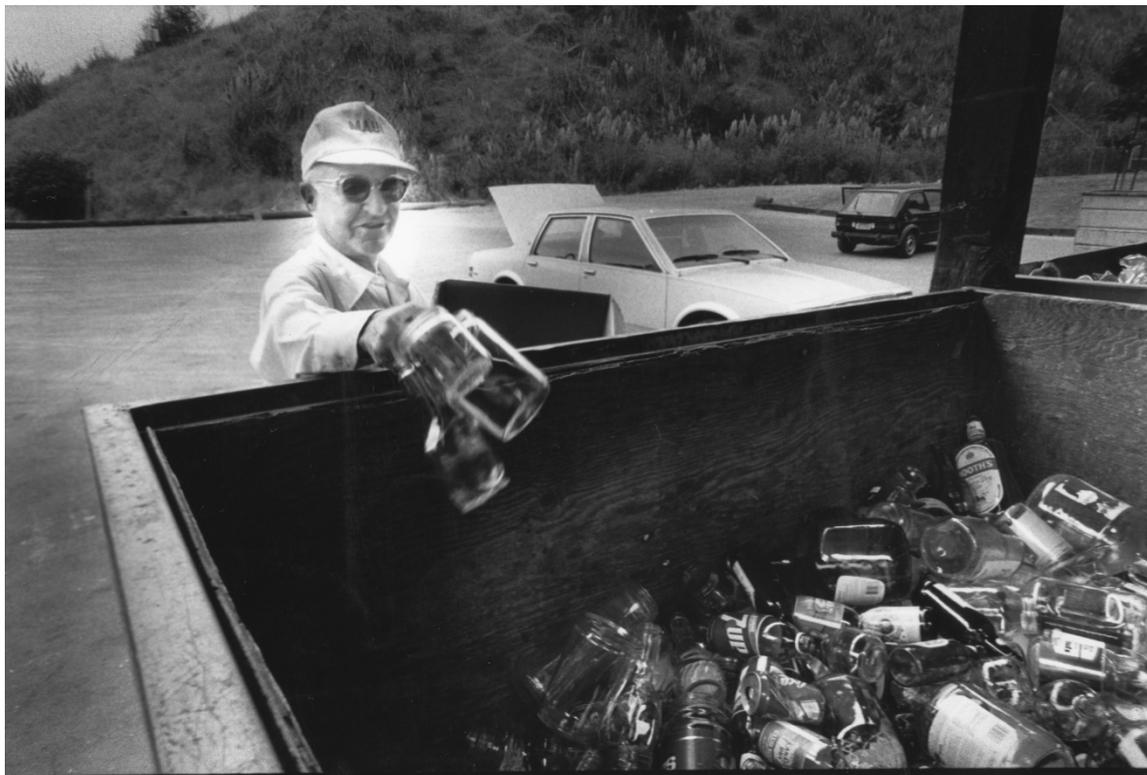
Broken glass was always a problem. And Witherell remembered one worker catching his hand in the conveyor (it was a long recuperation but he didn’t lose the hand) and Gonzalez remembers a forklift that overturned and crushed its driver’s ankle.

After that, he said, the city instituted better training. It also provides rigorous training in hazardous materials, Gonzalez said.

Then there were the thieves. “I had an occasion in which one person had a pickup truck and he backed up his truck to the scrap metal bin and started taking everything out of it into his truck,” Gonzalez said. “When I approached him he wasn’t happy about it.”

That incident ended peacefully. Not so the time Jaramillo caught one gent “taking the brass and copper off one of the bins. I said, ‘I’m sorry you cannot take that.’ He said, ‘Yeah, well.’ I said ‘No. Any valuable material we keep for the city.’ ”

Next thing Jaramillo knew, the guy was chasing him across the yard with a metal pipe, which he smashed against Jaramillo’s personal pickup truck. The ECPD hauled him away.



**A man dropping off glass** at the center in the late 1980s. Photo by David Toerge, West County Times archive

Nor was pay always the best. When Padia worked for E.C.ology, not only was there no union, but recycling workers were not regular city employees, which meant they lacked some benefits. **86**

When Jaramillo arrived, he was a regular city employee – but didn't feel highly esteemed. "You know," he said slowly, "the other thing is, I've been working here 25 years. I'm sorry you know, I started getting paid six dollars an hour in 1986. That doesn't change for a few years. I think my salary started changing when the union got in."

Staffing was always tight – not counting volunteers and court appointed "volunteers." When Dowdakin arrived in 1988 to drive a truck, she said, "there was one full-time recycling worker, Jose Jaramillo, and there was Susan (Kattchee, the manager). So there were two full-time positions and a bunch of part-time people who got paid."

"It wasn't until later that there became six or seven or eight full-time positions that were fully benefited positions, and union positions, good, well-paying, appropriately paid positions."



**Becky Dowdakin**, one of the center's managers, operates the forklift, circa late 1988-mid 1990s. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

But morale tended to be high.

"I thought it was a really cool place to work for a lot of reasons," Dowdakin said. "There were of course disputes and so forth. But generally people were hard workers."

And over the years, pay has greatly improved for workers – and the work has gotten safer and easier thanks to new, automated trucks that do the lifting, rather than the drivers, and a major reduction in the amount of processing that takes place at the center itself.

### Unexpected challenges

Recycling often demands nerves of steel. Padia remembered climbing into bins of aluminum cans to pull out tin cans and paper that had been thrown in by accident. “The bins were full of yellow jackets because of all the residual sugar in all the cans... I never got stung. They were more interested in the liquid.”

Worse, he said, was the individual who dropped off “these large black plastic bags full of ... dirty dog food cans that had been sitting in the sun for weeks usually. When you opened up that plastic bag, because we didn’t want plastic in the steel bin, it was ripe. That was not a favored task.”

A handful of problems jeopardized revenues – including the Case of the Porcelain Caps.

Nothing is more important to recyclers than ensuring their recycled materials actually get recycled and not land-filled. It’s a promise they make to their customers and the reason for their existence. At El Cerrito, former and current managers have said, recyclables have almost never been dumped.

When Dowdakin was at the center, she remembered, several loads of glass were rejected by their buyer because they were tainted by porcelain bottle caps. A for-profit recycling operation might have shrugged at that point and dumped it. Not El Cerrito.



**Joel Witherell and Susan Kattchee** at the center. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Turns out the caps were from bottles of Grolsch ale, which had porcelain caps attached to the bottles with metal hinges. “Remember them?” Dowdakin asked.

“When the glass is being rejected at that point it’s broken up so fine, it’s not like it’s bottles anymore, it’s smashed glass,” she said. “One time we raked through it and shoved it back into the bin. It was really hard work, and it was a bad thing.”

“I actually tracked down where those were coming from. They were coming from Schmidt’s Pub on Solano Avenue in Albany.”



**Doug Palmer** was one of several volunteers who looked over the book exchange in the late 1980s into the 1990s. Photo by Herman Bustamante Jr., West County Times archives

**Volunteers make their mark**

Since E.C.ology started with volunteers, it’s not surprising that over the years, volunteers have flooded in, not just as laborers but as inventors of new programs. It has also helped that the city has remained quick to adopt new ideas, and receptive to suggestions.

“People left reusable things, including books and household goods,” Dowdakin recalled. “There was always that attraction for people who wanted to get free stuff and drop off free stuff.”

The book exchange, which began informally, with people leaving a few books and taking a few books, was expanded by El Cerrito High School teacher Phil Gomshay, “the sparkplug behind the book recycling.” **87**

Later, during the late 1980s, Boy Scouts built a much improved set of shelves for the books. And for many years, Doug Palmer spent hours every week organizing the books and dumping those with mildew into the mixed paper bin. **88**

Volunteers also pushed to move recycling into the wider world. In 1990, Marisa Castellano was commuting from El Cerrito to Berkeley where she was getting a doctorate in education. “I noticed that everyone would just get off the train and either throw their newspaper in the trash or leave them on the train.”

She wrote BART, spoke to Kattchee, and within two years El Cerrito recycling placed the first recycling bins in any BART station. **89**



**The first recycling bins on BART** were installed in El Cerrito in 1990, thanks in large part to advocate Maria Castellano. Photo by Mark DuFrene, West County Times archive

It was also in 1990 that Marianne Hegeman, a geographer and community organizer, convinced El Cerrito to sponsor a citywide garage sale. This was right after the Loma Prieta earthquake, and Hegeman learned that many of the city’s seniors couldn’t afford to seismically retrofit their homes – and couldn’t get to their foundations in any case because their garages were so filled with stuff.

“I proposed to the city that they have a citywide garage sale,” she said in recent conversation. “People would have garage sales in their own homes and if they participated in the sale they would get half price off on their foundation inspections. So that’s how it all started.” 90

Hegeman’s focus was on re-using stuff, not recycling, which she says (and recyclers agree) is a much more energy-efficient strategy.

The first event was so successful – more than 200 participating homes, and thousands of buyers – it’s been repeated almost every year since, and has been copied by many neighboring towns.

Hegeman has remained involved with re-use in El Cerrito, working with recycling officials on ways to increase re-use in the new recycling center.



**Collecting paper curbside.** El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

### **Recycling goes mainstream**

In the 1980s and 1990s, new state laws drew attention to recycling. The laws included the California Bottle Bill, which went into effect October 1, 1987, mandating redemption fees for certain bottles. For years recycling advocates – including David Tam and Tom Padia – had fought for such a bill.

Another crucial law was AB939, the Integrated Waste Management Act in 1989, which required cities and counties to divert from the landfill 25 percent of their solid waste by 1995 and 50 percent by 2000 – goals that seemed threateningly optimistic to most jurisdictions, but not to El Cerrito, which was already well on its way. Jurisdictions that did not meet the goals faced steep fines.

The Bottle Bill required grocers to set up on-site redemption centers for bottles and cans – the now familiar igloos soon began popping up in parking lots. E.C.ology officials were afraid the igloos might siphon off all the valuable materials.

“What we’re hoping is, we don’t lose any business out of this,” the center’s new manager, Susan Kattchee, told the West County Times in 1987. Because El Cerrito already had a recycling center, by law it could have sought an exemption to keep redemption centers away. But Kattchee said that was never considered.

“With some people money talks, and if that’s what it takes (to get them to recycle), that’s what it takes.” **91**

As it turns out, Kattchee said a year after the bill went into effect, it did not hurt El Cerrito’s revenues – and volume continued to grow. **92**

Kattchee, who became manager in 1987, said the center had been suffering from “benign neglect” until she arrived. “No one had analyzed what could be improved with the center,” she said.



**Four students** work on their Junk Art project at Madera Elementary school daycare in 1992. It was to be a full sized figure of a man displayed at the recycling center. Photo by Mark DuFrene, West County Times archive

Besides herself, E.C.ology had only two employees when she arrived, plus “a huge amount of community volunteers. I called them (the court-appointed workers) ‘the involuntary volunteers.’ ” **93**

Kattchee, who began by spending one day a week driving a curbside truck, made several significant changes during her eight years running the center.

She restricted curbside collection to El Cerrito. The routes, she said, “had sort of bled over into Kensington and into Albany and into Richmond.” She boosted education, using assistant Lori Eattock (today she’s Lori Teachout) to write articles for the city newsletter and local newspapers.

“Why recycle? Why is recycling a good thing, why is it important. That was one of the things I started working on, putting together that educational piece,” Kattchee said.

Eattock also spearheaded a new tradition, running the recycling center’s first Junk Art Contest in April 1992. The young artists who competed, besides winning praise, were given re-used bowling trophies as prizes. “We wanted to do something exciting for Earth Day rather than hire a clown,” Eattock said. **94**

#### **Improvements and a new name at the recycling center**

It was during this time that the Goodwill trailer arrived at the center, accepting donations of household goods and clothing.

Kattchee also had the center fenced and reduced its hours, closing it on holidays. Before, she said, it had been open all day every day, which was a burden on staff.

A mulch pile was started at the center, providing mulch from city parks for residents’ backyards. “That was a Nancy Gans concept,” Witherell remembered. “She’d say, ‘Can we do this?’ ‘I guess we can. Let’s try it.’ And it worked.”



**A new logo** was part of the re-branding of the former E.C.ology. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive



**Delivering buckets** to people’s homes: Arturo Chacon tosses one to Mueerah Omar in 1989. Photo by Mark DuFrene, West County Times archive

The motor oil drop-off was improved, and wheeled recycling carts were provided to apartment and condo complexes in towns. Recycling bins were set up in a few of the city parks and, thanks to a grant from the Soroptomists International of El Cerrito, at several schools. **95**

Most noticeably, Kattchee got a grant to buy green recycling buckets for each homeowner. The avocado, chocolate, and yellow buckets that had been sold back in 1978 to curbside subscribers – in small quantities – had long since disappeared.

When the new buckets were handed to everyone in town in 1989, people had just been setting out their materials any which way in bags, boxes, or just loose,

The new buckets proved popular, greatly increased tonnage (“by 30 percent, if I’m remembering right,” Kattchee said), and made recycling much more visible.

“They went to everybody so if you weren’t already recycling it was sort of like ‘Here are your buckets, start recycling.’ That was the big message. You can do it,” Dowdakin said.

After the buckets, Kattchee said, “We got much more consistent routes ... Residents began to participate more consistently.” This was one case, however, where El Cerrito

lagged some of its neighbors. Both Berkeley and Albany had already started using containers.



**The program got modern trucks** in the early 1990s, making drivers' work less backbreaking. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

The center also replaced two old, repair-prone vehicles with a new 15-ton truck, the Load-all. "It was a low height loading so you didn't have to lift things over your head," Kattchee said. "It was an automatic dump. It was hydraulic, similar to a garbage truck, you could lift the bed and dump the material.

"It also had right-hand side drive," she said. That meant drivers could hop out right at the curb, and not have to run all the way around the truck, saving time and shoe leather.

Another significant change occurred in 1989. Kattchee dropped the name "E.C.ology" for the less colorful but more straightforward "El Cerrito Recycling Center." The old name, she said, was outdated and misleading. "It's a recycling center," she said, "not an ecology center."

In September that year California Resource Recovery Association named El Cerrito the state's "Best Drop-off Center." 96

The City council, urged on by Witherell, also looked at ways of boosting participation in recycling and better subsidizing it, by re-imposing the annual fee collected on the garbage bill, and by increasing garbage rates in 1990, and by persuading East Bay San to offer a low-rate mini-can, thus providing a financial incentive for residents to recycle more.

### **El Cerrito confronts...the landfill crisis!**

By the mid-1980s it was becoming clear to policy makers that they were running out of places to dump garbage. The Richmond landfill was reaching saturation as were landfills all over the state, prevented by space and environmental restrictions from expanding.

People were afraid costs would soar if garbage had to be trucked outside the immediate area, perhaps to Vacaville or points beyond.

This “crisis” hit home with the public locally when a plan emerged in the early 1980s to build a waste-to-energy plant near the Richmond landfill to burn the area’s garbage rather than truck it away.

Recyclers worried that paper and other potentially recyclable materials would instead be burned. Residents of nearby low-income, largely minority neighborhoods in San Pablo and North Richmond worried about the effect on their health, especially from burning plastics. The West County Toxics Coalition, which fought the plant, became a pioneer in the emerging environmental justice movement. Questions were also raised about the financing of the plant.

By the late 1980s the plan died. Instead, efforts began to build a regional transfer station, to consolidate and ship the area’s garbage elsewhere. El Cerrito joined with the county and the other West Counties cities in a joint powers authority for this purpose.

By the late 1980s, plans were afloat to build new landfills, with garbage companies competing over their favored locations. None were favored by neighbors. One was finally built near Bay Point in eastern Contra Costa County.



**The recycling center in 2010** looked much as it did in the late 1970s. Photo by Dave Weinstein

The garbage crisis hit home nationally during the summer of 1987 when a New York City barge, loaded with garbage, floated up and down the East Coast seeking in vain for a place to dump, pursued by the media much as O.J. Simpson was pursued several years later in his SUV.

As it turns out, the Richmond landfill remained open far longer than predicted. A transfer station was later built on the site.

**Will El Cerrito Recycling stay or will it go?**

The state's integrated waste management law was designed to spur local government to solve these problems by reducing land-filling. On January 1, 1990, when the law went into effect, El Cerrito had already achieved the goal set for 1995, of reducing its land-filled waste by 25 percent, Kattchee said.

Nonetheless, El Cerrito had plenty of paperwork to do to meet the letter of the law, including producing a waste reduction plan. Meanwhile, East Bay Sanitary proposed taking over recycling collection and drop-off from the city.

Over the next decade, the city council appointed two citizens task forces, the Integrated Waste Management Task Force, which met from 1993 to 1995, and the Recycling Task Force, which met from 2000 to 2003, to advise on related issues.

The first discussed how to meet the state's waste reduction goal – and whether to keep a city-owned recycling center. The second discussed in what form recyclables should be collected – as separate items, cans and bottles in one container, for example, paper in another; or co-mingled, everything mixed together -- and whether to keep a city-owned recycling center. 97



**Driving heavy equipment** through areas populated by the general public was standard procedures for decades – until it wasn't. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

Since the joint powers authority was planning to start regional recycling, Kattchee said, the city needed to decide whether to join in or continue to go it alone. There was talk of closing the recycling center and having all recycling take place at a regional facility near the Richmond dump.

Among the factors the task force weighed were what the alternatives would cost ratepayers, how flexible the city could be under each scenario in accepting new materials and providing such services as re-use and a book exchange, the center's value as an educational tool, and its "other values," including being "a friendly place people enjoy going to."

The first task force quickly agreed that the drop-off center should remain – and that the city should operate it. They also proposed that the city should process its own recyclables – not the regional facility. And the group suggested that the city "consider" giving curbside collection of recyclables to East Bay Sanitary if that proved to be the most cost-effective option. The city soon determined that it would not. Curbside collection remains a city-run operation to this day.



**The free mulch bins** were popular for decades. West County Times archive

"To make a switch and give up control, it would have to be for some really good reason," Hanin said in a recent interview. "And at least in my time here and in the ups

and backs we've had with the garbage company, I've never gotten something that said, 'Boy we need to do this.' ”

The task force also proposed changes in curbside collection that were adopted by the city council in September 1996 and went into effect the year after. **98**

One was curbside collection of green waste. This was another case of El Cerrito lagging some of its neighbors, which had begun collecting yard waste several years before. East Bay Sanitary was assigned the task of picking up the green waste, a job they do to this day.

Another change was a requirement that residents place not just their recyclables but their garbage curbside – a change East Bay Sanitary had been pushing since at least the mid 1970s. The era of trash haulers pulling cans from the side of the house was over; the age of automated pickup was nigh.

Along with this came same-day service for both garbage and recyclables, an innovation designed to make life simpler for residents.

Adding green waste added an immense tonnage to the city's recycling totals. Today, green waste accounts for about 20 percent of the city's total solid waste. By 1997, the city hit its state-mandated 50 percent landfill reduction thanks to the green waste collection.

**99**

#### **Time to replace the old recycling center**

By this time, it was clear, folks in town wanted to keep their recycling center. But they sure didn't need the tattered old pole barn.

“It didn't make sense to go out and buy a sorting line and develop a whole processing system and try to stick it under a barn that is about to fall down,” Becky Dowdakin determined in 1995 soon after she succeeded her boss, Kattchee as manager of the center.

“The council had approved a capital expenditure budget at least three years in a row that said we'll rebuild the recycling center,” Dowdakin said. “There was funding available in that enterprise fund to rebuild it and there was budget authority to do it. Alright. Go ahead.”

“I thought, ‘Really?! We're really going to rebuild it!?’ ”

Dowdakin hesitated because the issue of whether the city should contract out recycling “had never been put to bed. Not really.” The city manager had recently brought it up again, she said. The result? The Recycling Task Force was formed at the start of 2000 to take a fresh look. At the first meeting of the new task force, Dowdakin said the city did not want to wind up building “a Taj Mahal center.” **99**

The task force's task was to consider whether materials should be separated by type or mixed together and whether they should be processed at El Cerrito's recycling center or at the regional recycling center near the Richmond landfill.

The other task? To consider whether the recycling center should continue. And East Bay Sanitary again proposed taking over recycling. **100**

Why go through that one again?

Dowdakin said it was worth revisiting because times had changed in just a few years and so had recycling techniques and philosophies. Chief among the changes was a move towards single-stream recycling – placing everything from paper to plastic in a single, large wheeled bin.

The result would be recyclable material that brings in less money per ton than separated material because it isn't as pure. But, the thinking went, single-streaming

would boost recycling volumes because it's easier for residents, thus boosting revenues as well.

The recycling task force recommended sticking with separating materials, arguing that people in El Cerrito were used to it and it was working. They suggested keeping both collection and drop-off as city-run functions – a decision that disappointed East Bay Sanitary.

“We would love to do the collection,” Mark Figone, who succeeded his father Clyde at the company, said in a recent interview. “We’re a business. The more trucks we have on the road the more money we earn. But at the same time the relationship that we’ve had with the city over the years has been fantastic and if they want to stay in the recycling business, that’s fine.” **101**

The task force also suggested rebuilding the center. But it didn’t get rebuilt.



**El Cerrito recycling has attracted International attention.** In 1992 Susan Kattchee showed Japanese officials how to recycle. Photo by Mark DuFrene, West County Times archive



**Scott Hanin** spoke at a 2017 Historical Society event at the Recycling Center. Photo by Dave Weinstein

### **A recycling center for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Early on in its deliberations, the task force met a young man named Scott Hanin, who was running the regional recycling facility for the West Contra Costa Integrated Waste Management Authority. Hanin had been developing and evaluating recycling programs since 1987; he had created a recycling program for New York City. **102**

In 2001 he became El Cerrito's city manager. Did his expertise in recycling give him an edge in a city so recycling-centric?

"I don't know. It probably had something to do with it," Hanin said.

"But it was very nice from my perspective," he said, "to come to a place where I was grounded in one area I thought I could help with immediately."

Early on Hanin visited the center, Gonzalez recalled. "He was a very quiet person and I was trying to be very impressive as I was working in the yard. I thought that working hard was going to impress him a lot."

Maybe not.

"I thought we were doing a lot of wrong things, in his opinion," Gonzalez said, "and I think he was right."

"For example," Gonzalez said, "we were lifting with the forklift the bins full of materials and dumping them into the roll-off (containers). We had one person inside sorting out all the material...."

“He never did mention anything to me. But I’m sure he thought, ‘This is not right. This is dangerous. Someone could be killed and we’re going to be liable big time.’

“So after that things started to change gradually. We changed the ways we did work until the point that we have minimized all these hassles.”

Hanin began a series of major changes that moved almost all the industrial processing out of the center, from baling to sorting. “The first thing I did, there was a sort line in the back for bottles and cans and materials,” he said. “I shut that down immediately because I thought it was an accident waiting to happen.”

Dropping processing at the center also proved more cost-effective, he said – and required a much less expensive center to be rebuilt. A center that could have handled processing would have cost more than double what the current center is costing, said Garth Schultz, the city’s environmental analyst, who’s been managing the city’s solid waste and recycling efforts since 2006.

Under Hanin’s direction, the use of court-appointed “volunteers” ceased after an incident in which one court-appointed worker threatened Gonzalez and then-recycling manager Heather Abrams. **103**



**In 2009 the city switched to mixed curbside recycling.** El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

“Over time,” Hanin said, “we’ve tried to get all new trucks, all clean trucks, as energy efficient and non-polluting as any garbage truck can be, safe for the drivers and with cameras. We want to make sure our folks have whatever the best out there is.

“We don’t want anyone to point to anyone else, public or private, and say they do it better than we do.”

Hanin also axed plans for the new recycling center. “I think what was on table was much grander than what we’re building (now) and was trying to do much more,” he said. The old plan called for much more processing than the city does now – or plans to do in the future.

It was under Hanin’s watch that the city created the Environmental Services Division in 2008. Besides recycling, the division oversees all the city’s sustainability efforts, from rain gardens along San Pablo Avenue to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.



**Once the city moved to commingled recycling** in 2009, people used blue bins for recycling, green for green waste, and gray for landfill trash. West County Times archive

### **Recent changes in recycling**

In 2009, the city stopped collecting separated material curbside and moved, like most of its neighbors, to collect all recyclables together in a single container.

Although collecting mixed recyclables in carts is designed to boost volume, in El Cerrito, it turned out, making the switch increased volumes only “a little bit,” Schultz said. That’s because so many people were already participating.

Single-stream comes with a built-in disadvantage – since the materials are mixed, they sell for less. “There’s cross-contamination and you end up with a lower grade product at the end,” Schultz said.

Moving to single-stream did reduce what the city receives for the curbside material, Schultz said. Before the switch, he said, the city sold its curbside recyclables for an

average of \$100 a ton; that dropped to \$55 with single stream. “But that was offset by decreases in worker’s compensation, maintenance, staffing time, a lot of other changes.”  
“The tradeoff of cost versus revenue is actually coming out in our favor,” he said.



**Ted Keeler dumped aluminum cans** at the center in 1992.  
He enjoyed recycling there, he told a photographer.  
Photo by Herman Bustamante Jr. West County Times archive

The city does continue to collect separated materials – at the drop-off center. White office paper collected at the center can sell for \$250 a ton. “When it is source separated via drop-off at the center,” Schultz said, “we get more for it and it is recycled back into a higher grade commodity.”

El Cerrito’s recyclers have always taken a regional view, and the center remains a regional draw, with 30 to 40 percent of people coming to the drop-off center from out of town, he said. Most come from within a seven-mile radius, but some come from San

Francisco and other points within 30 miles, “because we collect stuff in an easier and more accessible fashion than most other places do.”

The city spends about \$2 million annually on recycling; last year, 20 percent of that came from material sales. That amount varies annually based on the market. Today, thanks to automation and restructuring of the operation, the recycling center requires only six workers.

“The big change are the routes and the trucks,” Gonzalez said. “We only need one operator for the truck. We don’t need a helper anymore. The truck has a mechanical arm which lifts up the toter into the truck, so that reduces from two people in a truck to one person only. Then we do less sorting in the yard.”

“I think all the people who worked before were people who suffered in one way because they have to lift and push,” Jaramillo added. “Now it’s much easier.”

“In the old days we used to separate everything in the center,” he said. “Right now they put everything together and ship it to another place.”

“The (curbside) trucks are filled throughout the day. They come back to the yard and stay overnight,” Gonzalez said. “Early in the morning at 4 a.m. they go to Oakland (to a recycling processor). Then they come back empty and go out at 6 in the morning. That’s the new system.”

“We’re only processing whatever the public is dropping off in the center. We’re not processing anything that’s collected curbside.”

Today El Cerrito collects about 4,500 tons of recyclables a year, 80 percent of that at the curb and the rest at the drop-off center. East Bay San also collects about 3,500 tons of green waste – yard trimmings and food scraps a year. **104**

The city’s total solid waste stream is 16,000 tons, Schultz said. By tonnage, El Cerrito diverts about half that from the landfill thanks to recycling, composting and re-use.

So what happens to El Cerrito’s recycled material?

Most is shipped to China where most items today are manufactured, though some material goes to manufacturers in the United States, Schultz said.

“White paper can go right back into white paper, newspaper can go right back into newspaper. Glass bottles can go into glass bottles,” he said. Some glass is used in roadbed material. Plastics are turned into such products as plastic bags or plastic lumber.

From the start, recycling managers in El Cerrito have confronted the vexing problem of finding markets for their material. Until a market for a material is developed, it can’t be recycled.

In recent years, El Cerrito fell behind many of its neighbors in collecting food waste (which started in 2010). The delay was due to outside forces – permitting delays at the landfill, where the material is mulched.

But for most materials, El Cerrito has remained far in front, becoming the first, or one of the first recycling centers anywhere, to accept plastic film of all sorts, hard plastics like tools and toys, and Styrofoam blocks.

The rebuilt center will include a densifier that will reduce immense chunks of the lightweight, air-filled material to dense logs. **105**

The city has also pioneered collecting a wide range of mixed plastics curbside. “I made it a policy case that we should find a processor that will take it all,” Schultz said, rather than ask residents to look for a “number one” or a “number two” marked on their plastic.

“People get really bogged down on those details and it makes recycling much harder,” he said. “My philosophy is, let’s make it a much lower bar for folks to enter.”



**In summer 2011** the recycling center was flattened. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Recycling has accomplished much in the past four decades but challenges remain. Startlingly, since the state’s waste management law went into effect in 1990, recycling has increased greatly – but, on a per capita basis, statewide at least, the amount of garbage sent to the dump has remained about the same, Schultz said. People are simply consuming more and using more packaging.

That’s one task to tackle. Another, Schultz said, is to ensure that recycling takes place for materials that don’t add much to tonnage figures but can damage the environment, like hazardous waste, batteries and compact fluorescent bulbs.

El Cerrito’s recycling center has always distinguished itself from the competition by being a comfortable, even enjoyable place to visit. It’s not a collection of bins and barrels in an industrial or semi-industrial setting, as so many recycling centers have been.



By February 2012, the rebuilt recycling center was taking shape – circular.  
Photo by Dave Weinstein

### **El Cerrito remains a model program**

The rebuilt center will go even farther in providing a welcoming setting, said Melanie Mintz, the environmental services manager. It will be one of the few multi-material recycling centers that is easily accessible to the public. But if all goes well, it may not remain one of the few for long.

“Our model is a really exciting model,” she said, “that I think might end up being duplicated.”

E.C.ology may not have been the first recycling center in the United States or California – or even in El Cerrito itself, which had two small, short-lived centers in the early 1970s, one in the hills and one in the parking lot at the El Cerrito Co-op grocery. **106.** But it was certainly one of the first, both in California and nationwide. When E.C.ology started, perhaps half a dozen cities and a handful of colleges in the state were recycling.

“I can’t think of anything that El Cerrito was absolutely the first in,” said Richard Gertman, who helped several recycling programs get started in the early 1970s.

Becky Dowdakin believes El Cerrito may have had the first weekly curbside collection, at least in the Bay Area.

And Witherell, who searched the state for similar recycling centers in the early 1970s, says El Cerrito's was "the first municipally owned and operated drop-off center in the state, "as far as I know."



**Rich Bartke**, who served on the City Council when the center was born, and Ken Little, one of the center's founders, reminisced at a 2012 program at the recycling center put on by the El Cerrito Historical Society and the city. Photo by Dave Weinstein

"It was one of the pioneering recycling programs in the state," Geoff Hill said. "I don't know any multi-material buyback centers that was run by the public. Especially for that time period, back in the 1970s, there was nothing going on anywhere else."

Certainly El Cerrito's recycling program was one of the most successful and longest lived, and it has inspired other recycling programs for decades – sometimes directly, as El Cerrito veterans moved to other organizations.

Gregg Cook, who has gone on to become a Sacramento lobbyist, served on statewide environmental committees while still on the El Cerrito council, where he "spread the word about how a recycling center could work, and in fact it could make enough money to sustain itself."

AB 939, the landmark state law mandating that localities divert trash from the landfill, was inspired in part by El Cerrito's success, Cook said, citing a conversation he had at the time with the bill's author, then-Assemblyman Byron Sher. "Byron told me he

was thinking of a bill that would require every city to have a program similar to what El Cerrito has.”

El Cerrito was explicitly designated a model program when it received two rounds of state funding that allowed the city to take over E.C.ology in 1977 as an “experimental” program. Witherell recalled how El Cerrito spread the word about recycling.

“Our city council, when they went to regional meetings, they’d talk about it,” he said. “They were very proud about it existing.”

Another state law inspired by El Cerrito was SB 650, the Litter Control, Recycling and Resource Conservation Act of 1978, which provided funding for local recycling. Richard Gertman, who helped develop the law and was the man who helped El Cerrito get its first recycling grants, said SB 650 was designed to “replicate what we’d done with El Cerrito and Santa Rosa.”



**Allan Gardiner**, who built the first glass crusher in 1973, reminisced during the 2012 gathering at the center. Photo by Dave Weinstein

E.C.ology, Gertman said, “was one of the programs that helped show that recycling would work.”

The recycling center also gained international renown, with delegations sometimes visiting from overseas, as in 1992, when Kattchee gave a tour to a dozen officials from Kita, Japan, here to learn about handling solid waste. **107**

After leaving El Cerrito, Tom Padia started San Francisco’s curbside collection. He has since become source reduction and recycling director at Stopwaste, an Alameda County agency.

Susan Kattchee went on to supervise recycling for Oakland and to run recycling programs for StopWaste in Alameda County. Today she is Oakland’s environmental services manager. Becky Dowdakin is Oakland’s solid waste and recycling program supervisor.

Geoff Hill, the early El Cerrito recycler, took what he learned in El Cerrito to Maine, where the state hired him to promote local recycling statewide.

Several veterans of the El Cerrito program worked with the Northern California Recycling Association or Californians Against Waste to promote recycling, including Padia and David Tam.

Ken Little became a land-use lawyer in Walnut Creek, often working on garbage issues. He also became an evangelical pastor.

After retiring, Witherell moved to a rustic site on Clear Lake where he learned that the Black Forest, a forested hillside on Mount Konocti across from his home, was about to be clear cut. He formed a group that preserved the 255-acre forest, which is now owned by the Lake County Land Trust.



**Its origins** may have been humble but the impact of the El Cerrito Recycling Center has been huge. El Cerrito Historical Society, Recycling Center Archive

### **Why El Cerrito?**

Why did El Cerrito, of all places, emerge as a recycling leader? Was there something special about the town?

“No. Not really,” said Virginia Rice Mason, one of E.C.ology’s founders. “It was fertile ground though. It was small enough so that you could have influence on the city.”



**Fans of the recycling center** headed down Schmidt Lane towards the former quarry for the ribbon-cutting for the new Recycling center. Photo by Dave Weinstein

Ken Berndt, who was on the council, agrees that being small and responsive to the public helped. “It doesn’t take a lot of people at a meeting who make their feelings heard for something to be done. You could have a minority of people, eight, ten, twelve, and things get done. And I think that’s what happened.”

A more telling question, of course, isn’t why El Cerrito emerged as a leader, but why it has remained one. Over the decades, the city has proven quite nimble in adjusting how the center works, adding new programs quickly, often following suggestions from residents.

Being run by the city, and not a non-profit organization, provided an extra measure of stability – with even more supplied by an enterprise fund that gave recycling a dedicated source of cash. It also helped that for 20 years recycling was overseen by a city official who was personally and professionally committed to its success.

The center’s attractive location and congenial staff have kept folks coming in – and by coming in, they’ve made it their own.

Witherell likes the way the recycling center has evolved.

“It’s still being continued, it’s continued to grow, and the fact they’re rebuilding it,” Witherell said, “what a proud moment I have just knowing that.”

#

*Dave Weinstein, a member of the city’s Environmental Quality Committee and president of the El Cerrito Historical Society, covered El Cerrito for the West County Times when the city council repealed “the stinking tax” that funded recycling. He served*

*on the city's Integrated Waste Management Task Force and the Recycling Task Force. He is senior staff writer for CA Modern magazine, and the author of "Signature Architects of the San Francisco Bay Area," "It Came from Berkeley," the text for "Berkeley Rocks: Building With Nature," and an e-book, "Where the Sewage Meets the Sea: Stege Sanitary District and the Growth of the East Bay," a history of the sanitary district that serves El Cerrito and nearby areas.*



West County Times archive

**This history is dedicated to Joel Witherell (1938-2014), who more than anyone else ensured that El Cerrito's recycling center would grow, prosper – and continue.**

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