

## Recycling Steering Committee Assessment Summary

### Introduction, Purpose and Methods

The Department of Environmental Quality engaged Oregon Consensus (OC) to conduct a brief collaborative assessment to help the Oregon Recycling Steering Committee (SC) establish a process architecture and scope of topics to inform their work. From September through October of 2018, the OC staff conducted 14 interviews representing a cross-section of the various perspectives on the Oregon recycling system. This summary provides a synthesis of information gathered from interviews, reflected in key themes and issues to be addressed, as well as process observations and potential next steps for the group's consideration. This is not intended to provide a comprehensive description of all topics discussed or questions raised.

The OC team asked interviewees a set of common questions which included a focus on interviewees' perceived challenges and opportunities related to Oregon's recycling system; what major topics they felt should be addressed; and what a successful outcome looks like from their perspective. Additionally, interviewees were asked their current understanding of the SC process, scope of work and research agenda and any suggestions around these topics.

### Key Themes

Overall, interviewees conveyed a sense of optimism and willingness to work with one another in a collaborative process to address challenges and improve Oregon's recycling system. Many interviewees noted the most recent crisis and resulting disruptions in the market provided a timely opportunity to address bigger and longer term changes to Oregon's recycling system, and that the status quo is not desirable nor sustainable. There was also a recognition that the many parts of the system are highly interdependent and as such, any desired changes to the system will require a collaborative effort of the various stakeholders representing the diversity of interests within the system.

Cross-cutting themes included:

***Transparency and shared accountability across the system:*** A 'reset' is needed to ground truth and create transparency among the players within the system. This includes working to educate the steering committee and the public so that all can have a shared understanding of the current realities of the system's recycling capabilities. Some interviewees commented on the contamination issues that grew with the introduction of curbside commingling; others talked about the limitations of the processing facilities to sort out the growing diversity of products for recycling; and some pointed to the post-consumer markets which are, or are not, currently available. While not an exhaustive list, interviewees spoke of the need to better understand:

- plastics and other materials composition and the evolution of packaging;

- contamination and different methods for reducing contamination;
- economic impacts from reductions in paper recycling;
- the desires of the public to inform long term planning; and
- contributions and impacts ‘upstream’ of end of life management including a closer look at extended producer responsibility models.

**Public engagement:** All interviewees spoke about the need to work together to educate and respond to the public in order to bring consumers along while developing long term improvements. For some interviewees, this engagement focused on public messaging about the list of recyclable materials e.g. why/why aren’t certain materials able to be recycled. Others suggested clear messaging is needed to educate the public about contamination at the curb to help address contamination issues in the system. However, a tension emerged and need for balance between informing the public about current realities while also striving to make long term changes that could allow for similar or higher levels of collection and recycling that has come with the introduction of commingling.

**The List(s):** While perspectives on the particulars of a statewide list varied, many interviewees supported the development of a single materials list and acknowledged the need for local and regional jurisdictions to retain flexibility within their programs. Interviewees noted equity concerns around cost burdens and access; clear and consistent public messages; and again, a balance of uniformity and flexibility across the state. Everyone recognized that key issues for the SC to address together are the materials on the list and how the list should be messaged and used as a statewide guidance vs. unique to each local community.

### ***Steering Committee Process***

Many interviewees described the need for more clarity around the SC process and scope, and offered questions and suggestions:

- **Decision-Making:** All interviewees shared a desire to take a consensus-based approach to decision making but some noted uncertainty about how to move things forward if a consensus is not reached.
- **Roles/Responsibilities:** **DEQ** is recognized as a leader in convening and helping to shepherd the work in partnership with the full SC leadership. The **Steering Committee** is recognized as the key leadership that will ultimately need to agree to and be willing to help advance any system changes. Questions emerged about whether and how DEQ would be able to provide adequate staffing support to the effort, and some SC members offered their assistance through funding, expertise and other resources. Suggestions were made about the role of **subcommittees**, and most suggested they would support the SC in reviewing information, deliberating and informing recommendations. Interviewees emphasized that subcommittees

should be diversely represented, guided by the needs of the SC, and include at least one SC member on each group to ensure continuity.

- *Scope to address short-term and long-term issues:* A stakeholder team has been meeting for the past year to address near term needs in response to the recent market disruptions that occurred in early 2018. As the SC gets under way to look at longer term goals and changes to the system, members shared the need to stay informed and/or act on near term changes so as to address and align current actions while updating the system long term. They suggested the need for dovetailing or linking the stakeholder work with the SC work.
- *Research Agenda:* Responses were mixed regarding the understanding of DEQ's research agenda. Everyone asked that DEQ clarify their approach to research, and get buy in from the SC about how this will inform the group's work. Most interviewees supported bringing independent expertise and study in to the process but also recognized the depth and breadth of knowledge and expertise within the group, and that public values should be viewed as valid information for the group. Again, a balance is needed to support short term advancements and deep enough inquiry of current and future challenges and opportunities to allow for a well-informed deliberation and thoughtful approach to long term system updates.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

In summary, there is a commitment by all to work collaboratively together to shape the future of Oregon's recycling system. The issues are complex but not intractable and an opportunity has been presented to shine a light in order to build a resilient, effective system that reduces negative impacts on the environment and withstands external market volatility over time.

To address the process architecture concerns, OC will engage with the SC to develop a set of operating guidelines that the group can use to guide their work together. This will be codified through an Operating Procedures document per approval of the SC. It will include guidance on purpose and scope; principles; decision making; communications; and group norms.

To address the substantive themes, OC will work with the DEQ planning team to refine draft scope and work plans for approval of the SC at an upcoming meeting. Through agenda setting and other in-process activities, OC will work with the SC and DEQ project team to ensure all relevant issues are addressed in a timely but robust way that leads the group toward a set of shared recommendations by the end of 2019. This may require a willingness by members of the SC to help narrow or expand their individual goals to meet the needs of the full group, and will require resources by way of technical and process support to assist the group in meaningful and agreement seeking deliberations.

*This report respectfully submitted by the Oregon Consensus project team. Questions or comments on the assessment may be raised at a future Steering Committee meeting, or via direct phone or email contact to Robin Harkless: [hrobin@pdx.edu](mailto:hrobin@pdx.edu) or 503-725-9099. OC wishes to thank all who participated in the interviews for sharing their time and thoughtful responses.*

## **Appendix A: Interview List**

### **Government representatives**

- City of Portland — Bruce Walker
- DEQ — Loretta Pickerell (chair)
- Lane County — Sarah Grimm
- League of Oregon Cities (City of Beaverton) — Scott Keller
- Metro — Pam Peck
- Assoc. of Oregon Counties (Deschutes County) — Timm Schimke

### **Recycling industry representatives**

- EFI — Jeff Murray
- Far West Recycling — Vinod Singh
- Oregon Refuse and Recycling Assoc. — Kristan Mitchell
- Rogue Disposal & Recycling — Laura Leebrick
- Waste Connections — Jason Hudson.
- Waste Management — Matt Stern

### **Other association representatives**

- Association of Oregon Recyclers — Amy Roth
- Recycling Partnership — Dylan De Thomas