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If people are paying an extra nickel or dime for coffee cups, then you can create a market to return them. This also gets people in the habit of recognizing this is a material that needs to be dealt with. Take those red polystyrene cups – Solo hard plastic cups – they are everywhere. We should absolutely have a take-back program for those. If we can't find ways to recycle them that are environmentally and economically ethical, we should stop manufacturing them.

It's difficult to regulate waste reduction because there is so much corporate lobbying. Places like India are pushing forward progressive policies banning single-use plastic. They are pushing the envelope in a way the U.S. is not. Much of this is thanks to the work of committed and informed activists, including waste picker cooperatives.

H.H.: As you know, *Street Roots* serves people in extreme poverty. How can this community attain a reliable source of income segregating and selling waste as a dignified, valued part of the waste management solution? How can we get there?

T.C.T.: It needs to be collaborative. You need to bring all the different stakeholders to the table: waste pickers, or canners as we call them here, but also city officials, waste haulers, all the different stakeholders so we can work together. It doesn't have to be a matter of competition so much as identifying where the unmet needs are. Waste picker cooperatives around the world are incredibly adaptive. It's just a matter of thinking creatively to figure out how to fill those needs collectively.

How can you meet a number of goals with one act? How can you provide necessary municipal waste management services while also providing a social service, employing some of the most marginalized people in society and being inclusive economically, racially and gender-wise? I think we need to expand our definition of inclusivity and be much more participatory in our provision of essential services in Portland.



Taylor Cass Talbott stands in front of a dump site in Pune, India.

PHOTO BY BRODIE CASS TALBOT

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TAYLOR CASS TALBOTT

H.H.: I know many in the community *Street Roots* works with feel embarrassed because the public perceives them as these garbage makers. Camps get swept, and lots of garbage is left behind. Can you talk about that?

T.C.T.: Yes, that's a really important issue. Being from Portland, I've never seen such bad relations between housed and unhoused residents before, and a lot of that has to do with the mess that is created.

We don't have enough affordable housing,

so we have these camps generating waste, and there is no legal way for them to dispose of that waste. It's actually illegal to put waste in someone else's bin, just as it is illegal to take waste out.

People living in camps are in this uncomfortable situation where they are being criminalized for the materials they are creating, and it attracts complaints, which leads to sweeping.

H.H.: It might look like they are generating a lot of waste, but compared to housed people, they consume much less.

T.C.T.: Absolutely. And so much of the waste they are consuming is because of circumstances: clothing, because they don't have access to laundry; packaged food, because they have nowhere to cook. Also, you see things accumulated in camps from housed people. You see chairs, couches and mattresses they have dragged, that have been dumped by housed people.

According to Metro, 60 percent of all waste illegally dumped on the street is from housed people, so we have this skewed perception that it is all homeless people leaving this waste.

H.H.: They are just giving things a second or third life.

T.C.T.: Yes, and there is a dignity aspect of having waste management services provided to you. In some of the projects I've seen around town, where everyday citizens are actually providing waste management services to houseless camps or communities, there is a shift that happens when people are given a bag and told someone will be by to pick it up in a couple days. There is a relationship that is built from giving someone something that only housed people are usually afforded. Of course that is challenging when they are being swept every week, which is the current environment in Portland.



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