

## **The War On Waste Data**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In January 2004 the Waste Unit of Port Stephens Council discovered a 3% hole in the revenue collected from domestic waste service charges. The gap was due to about 780 rateable properties potentially not paying section 496 domestic waste service charges while potentially receiving a waste service from the waste contractor.

To make matters worse, the waste contractor had been paid for these services but Council had not recovered the revenue to balance the ledger.

With a new two bin system tender on the horizon it was decided to balance the rates revenue data with the actual waste services to ensure the next waste tender was as accurate as possible.

This paper highlights how Port Stephens Council staff rectified a problem across many council departments in the face of negative public opinion.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **THE Symptom**

The phenomenon of Rates and Waste databases not matching perfectly is not unusual to local government. What is different in this case is the process of balancing the rates revenue data with the number of services paid to the contractor, as well as the decision by Council to recover lost revenue from past years.

The problem in this case was really a symptom of a bigger issue. The symptom manifested itself as a significant difference between two databases that resulted in:

1. The Waste contractor being paid for 26900\* waste services
2. The Rate Section issuing 26115\* domestic and non domestic waste service charges
3. 3% difference between rates revenue and contractor costs = lost revenue
4. Lost revenue dated back to pre 1993 in some cases.

\* Figures used in this paper are representative only.

#### **The Cause**

In this particular case the gap in the database was the result of:

1. The delivery of new bins to 'letter boxes' for the waste contract that started in 1993
2. D.A.'s dating back to 1980 that had not been signed off as completed
3. Completed D.A.'s not being communicated to Rates staff

4. Waste service charges that had not been raised against properties after D.A.'s had been finalised
5. The change in database software from "Genasys" to "Authority" in 1999 and 2000

### **The Team**

To resolve the problem a team of specialist from across many departments within Port Stephens Council was assembled. These positions and their roles are outlined below.

1. Waste Management Coordinator
  - a. Responsible for all aspects of the recovery of lost revenue
  - b. Coordinated staff to audit databases
  - c. Represented Council when presenting the project to the media and public
  - d. Developed communication plan
  - e. Provided regular information updates to Group Managers and Council
2. Senior Rates Clerk
  - a. Legal and operational advice on all aspects of issuing rates under the Local Government Act 1993
  - b. Provided staff to audit properties (one by one) to determine status of D.A.
  - c. Issued special Rates Notices
  - d. Provided advice to affected ratepayers
3. GIS Specialist
  - a. Cross referenced all parcels of land on GIS system (CadCorp) with D.A. data on each property from the Rates system (Authority)
  - b. Presented, spatially and in data form, information on all properties that have a D.A. linked to the property and did not have a domestic or non-domestic waste service charge linked to the property.
4. Communications Coordinator
  - a. Developed communication plan
  - b. Provided media releases
5. Development and Building Manager
  - a. Provided staff to research D.A. status of affected properties
  - b. Followed up on old D.A.'s that had not been finalised or inspected for some time
6. Customer Service Staff
  - a. Received all initial enquiries regarding Council's intention to recover lost revenue on some properties
  - b. Researched D.A. status of affected properties

### **The Process**

In brief the process adopted to fix the problem included:

1. Research
  - a. Sizing up the problem by cross-referencing all parcels of land with a D.A. and no waste service charge.
2. Communication
  - a. Communicating the size of problem to Group Managers and recommending a course of action to fix the problem
  - b. Because this issue involved recovering revenue for past years, it was not politically popular. Therefore, Council was fully informed of the advantages and disadvantages of the process of recovering the lost revenue

3. Legal advice
  - a. Only Council could decide to waive owed revenue for past years
4. More communication
  - a. Sending affected ratepayers a preliminary letter allowed time for ratepayers to rectify the problem before official Special Rates Notice was issued.
  - b. Sending a Fact Sheet explaining rates recovery action to affected ratepayers
  - c. In short, giving affected ratepayers as much information as they need to understand the problem.
5. Implementation
  - a. Issuing special Rates Notice that included waste service charges from past years.
6. More communication
  - a. Having one person responsible for fielding complex enquiries regarding the problem to ensure consistency of information.
7. Reflection
  - a. Remembering not to take the hate mail personally.
  - b. Fixing the system so it does not happen again to the same magnitude

### **The Outcome**

1. Over \$100,000 in lost revenue was returned to Waste Reserve
2. Rates date base was more closely aligned with waste contractor database in time for waste tender
3. Illegal dwellings were flushed out for Building Inspectors to investigate
4. Properties that were not able receive a waste service, therefore not liable to pay a domestic waste service charge, were flushed out and recorded for future reference
5. Rates, Building and Waste databases given a thorough clean up.
6. Waste tender released with accurate data

### **CONCLUSION**

As it turned out Port Stephens Council staff are still finding properties that are able to receive a waste service but are not paying a waste service charge. The 'blanket delivery' of new bins assured us of that. The lesson here is that databases are only as good as the information that has been entered into them. Port Stephens Council now checks waste service charges against bin services every six months and plans a biennial audit of the rates, building and waste databases.

### **POST SCRIPT**

Two years after the process was completed the staff involved still talk about how the project affected them. This is not easy to explain, as on the surface, it may appear that the project was simply about debt recovery and some database analysis – not really the stuff to inspire the masses. However, it was one of those projects that comes along and unites a Council as it crosses over all departments and responsibilities. In memory of the great War on Waste Data I have written a song. I hope you enjoy it.

## **THE SONG**

“And the boss sang balance the ledger”

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(Sung to the tune of “And The Band Played Waltzing Matilda” by Eric Bogle)

When I was a young man I counted old bins  
To prepare for the fun of a waste tender  
And what I did find out did all my old sins  
Seemed waste charges were a little bit slender  
Then on one windy day the big boss said “Son  
Your budget is stuffed so your days are soon done”  
So in no time at all I stopped all that was fun  
And I strapped myself to my computer.

And the boss sang “balance the ledger”  
“Or your days in the waste game are few”  
For to balance the bills with the bins needs strong wills  
So I called on some mates to make do.

How well I remember that fateful fine day  
With the Rate Clerk and GIS expert  
And how we cross-referenced recorded D.A.’s  
With waste service charges that were dead cert  
When to our surprise we found bins out on site  
With no waste charge linked to the property right  
So we set a clear path so the future was bright  
To align bins and budget together

And the boss sang “balance the ledger”  
As we sorted through years of owed dues  
We balanced ours and the contractor checked his  
Then we thought “how will we break the news”

Now after some weeks checking data with mates  
We said “Boss this is what we should do now”  
To inform ratepayers that they owed extra rates  
For free services given out somehow  
The first letter warned then the second did set  
Two years of back charges for services met  
And the hate mail did flyer like a Williamtown jet  
Council work’s done for love not the money

And the boss said “you’ve balanced the ledger”  
Bin delivery will test your work dear  
New bins flushed out more of those unapproved doors  
Then we started all over again.