

From Wastebusters to Waste Avoidance

How Nimbin Helped Transform Waste Management in the Lismore Local Government Area

By Diana Roberts OAM

Introduction

On cold winter mornings, smoke would drift across the Nimbin valley from the town rubbish tip. For decades the burning of municipal waste had been accepted as a normal part of country life. Household rubbish, plastics, tyres, treated timber, organic material, batteries and countless other discarded materials were routinely set alight in an attempt to reduce the ever-growing volume of waste. Few in Nimbin questioned the practice. It was simply part of village life.

By 1990, however, a small group of Nimbin residents had begun asking uncomfortable questions. What exactly was being released into the air each time the tip burned? Was burying or burning rubbish really the only solution? Could valuable materials be recovered before they became waste? More fundamentally, why was society producing so much waste in the first place?

Those questions sparked a campaign that would reach far beyond the boundaries of a small country village landfill. What began as a local effort to end the hazardous practice of tip burning evolved into the formation of Nimbin Wastebusters, one of the earliest community-based resource recovery initiatives in regional Australia. In doing so, it helped reshape the way waste was understood across the Lismore Local Government Area, replacing a philosophy centered on disposal with one based increasingly on waste avoidance, resource recovery and community education.

This is not simply the story of a rubbish tip. It is the story of how a small rural community challenged accepted practice, developed practical alternatives, and worked with local government to achieve lasting change. Volunteers, environmental advocates, Council officers, researchers and elected representatives all played a part in a transformation that anticipated many of the principles now regarded as fundamental to modern waste management.

Today, resource recovery centres, transfer stations, composting programs and waste avoidance strategies are accepted features of local government. In 1990, they represented a very different vision of the future. This is the story of how that future began in Nimbin.

Smoke Over the Village

Nimbin landfill existed off Blade Road, only a short distance from the village. Depending on prevailing weather, smoke from burning waste would drift across homes, businesses and the local school, often lingering for hours. Tyres, plastics and countless other discarded materials

smouldered slowly, leaving an acrid smell that many residents simply accepted as part of village life. Others were beginning to question it.

By the late 1980s, the landfill operated much as many small rural tips across Australia. Waste was deposited at the tip face, periodically pushed over by machinery and, when considered necessary, set alight to reduce its volume. Burning was regarded as a practical management tool. Little thought was given to what the smoke contained or its potential impact on nearby residents.

Yet the nature of household rubbish had changed. Earlier generations had discarded mostly organic materials, glass and metal. Increasingly, however, domestic waste included plastics, synthetic rubber, treated timber, chemicals, batteries and a growing range of manufactured products never intended to be burnt in the open. Every fire released an unknown mixture of pollutants into the air above the village.

Concern was growing not only because of the smell but because information about the health risks associated with burning plastics and other synthetic materials was becoming more widely available. As environmental awareness increased, residents began asking whether routine tip burning remained acceptable.

At the tip itself, Charlie Soward had long managed the facility under an arrangement with Lismore City Council that allowed him to recover and sell materials of commercial value before they disappeared into landfill. Steel, aluminium, glass and other reusable items were salvaged wherever possible. Charlie became a familiar and respected figure whose practical knowledge of the landfill would later prove invaluable.

Charlie's work, however, differed from the ideas that were beginning to emerge within the community. His focus was understandably on recovering materials that retained commercial value. Others were beginning to ask a broader question: if so much could be recovered, how much of what was arriving at the tip ever needed to become waste? That question would soon become the driving force behind Nimbin Wastebusters.

A small group of local residents was beginning to ask a broader question: if valuable resources could be recovered, how much of the waste arriving at the tip need ever become waste at all? Spearheaded by the newly formed Nimbin Environment Centre, a campaign commenced to stop tip burning while extending the life of the landfill by introducing effective recycling and resource recovery. And so began Nimbin Wastebusters.

From Concern to Action

Formed in 1990, spearheaded by the newly formed Nimbin Environment Centre, Nimbin Wastebusters initially consisted of representatives from six local organisations. Membership quickly expanded to more than twenty volunteers committed to developing a more sustainable approach to waste management for Nimbin and its surrounding communities. Pan Community Council, an umbrella organisation for multiple occupancy communities in the area, played an important role, with many residents of local multiple occupancy communities contributing both

their time and practical experience. Ending tip burning and establishing a local recycling depot became the group's immediate priorities.

From the outset Wastebusters recognised that Nimbin needed a locally based solution. the importance of a locally based waste management solution. Expecting residents to travel to Lismore to dispose of rubbish was neither practical nor affordable. The challenge was therefore to retain a local waste facility while finding a more environmentally responsible way of managing it.

As the campaign gathered momentum, waste management became the subject of wider community discussion. A public meeting convened by the Nimbin and District Progress Association attracted about eighty-five residents to consider the future of the tip. While opinions differed on the best way forward, there was broad agreement that Nimbin should retain a local waste disposal service. Many feared that ending tip burning would simply hasten the landfill's closure without providing an alternative.

Much of the practical work occurred at the tip itself. Wastebusters volunteers met weekly alongside Charlie Soward, who held the scavenging rights, sorting recyclable materials while learning how the landfill operated. While Charlie's objectives differed from those of Wastebusters, his practical knowledge proved invaluable during the group's formative months. Volunteers observed the types of waste arriving each week and began considering how greater quantities of material could be recovered before reaching the landfill face.

Those weekly working bees soon became planning sessions. Members discussed traffic flow, public safety, storage areas, signage and the practical operation of a community recycling depot. They identified a suitable location, prepared site plans and worked with Council to have the area fenced, levelled and gravelled. Recognising that enthusiasm alone would not establish the infrastructure required, submissions for funding for a recycling shed were made to Lismore Council, who weren't particularly excited by the project, and an application for financial support made to the Federal government's Greenhouse Grant scheme.

Wastebusters was driven by a philosophy that extended well beyond recycling. Members believed the community itself should take greater responsibility for the waste it produced. The proposed recycling depot would accept separated recyclable materials such as glass, paper, cardboard, steel, aluminium and selected plastics, while mixed waste requiring disposal would continue to attract disposal charges. Volunteers made it clear that they would not sort mixed rubbish on behalf of users. Their objective was to encourage people to reduce, reuse and separate waste before arriving at the tip.

For Wastebusters, recycling was never the end goal. It was one part of a broader approach that combined waste avoidance, resource recovery and community education. The group believed lasting environmental change depended as much on changing community behaviour as it did on improving waste facilities. At a time when landfill remained the dominant response to municipal waste throughout Australia, Nimbin Wastebusters was proposing something quite different: a community-managed recycling depot where environmental responsibility, rather than

commercial return, shaped the way waste was managed. Whether Lismore City Council would embrace that vision remained uncertain.

An end to tip burning

By 1990, the campaign to end tip burning had become a major environmental issue for the Nimbin Environment Centre and the newly formed Wastebusters. For Lismore City Council, however, the issue was far from straightforward. The Nimbin landfill was nearing the end of its operational life and routine burning had long been used to reduce the volume of waste entering the site. Council officers warned that without burning the remaining landfill capacity could be exhausted by the end of 1991, creating significant financial and operational challenges. Replacing the landfill or transporting waste to Lismore would involve substantial expense. From Council's perspective, continuing to burn waste appeared to be the only practical means of maintaining a local disposal service.

The proposal submitted by the Environment Centre to end tip burning in Nimbin was narrowly defeated within Council, surviving only until the Mayor exercised a casting vote against it. For many in the Nimbin community this was a disappointing outcome. They believed they had presented not simply a protest, but a practical alternative built around recycling and resource recovery.

Rather than abandoning the campaign, Wastebusters broadened it. Research undertaken by members of the group was forwarded to the Member for Richmond and to the New South Wales Chemical Inquiry. Most significantly, correspondence with the State Pollution Control Commission (SPCC) challenged Council's assertion that tip burning had official approval. The Commission's response was unequivocal, they would be 'obligated to take legal action' unless Council stopped burning all compostable garbage. For Wastebusters this represented independent confirmation that their concerns were justified. For Council it fundamentally altered the debate. Alternative strategies to regularly burning a tip face to speed up decomposition, restrict rodent population and prohibit disease, while not covering the tip daily with clean fill, were now an imperative.

Without routine burning, the remaining life of the landfill would inevitably be shortened. The question was no longer whether change was required, but how Nimbin could retain a local waste service once the landfill reached capacity.

For many months Wastebusters volunteers had been working alongside Charlie Soward, recovering recyclable materials and demonstrating that significant quantities of waste could be diverted from landfill. They argued that increased recycling, combined with community education, could substantially reduce the volume of material requiring disposal and make a transfer station a practical alternative.



When the Nimbin Rubbish Tip faced closure in 1991, the Nimbin Wastebusters were formed in order to establish and run a community recycling and waste transfer facility. Pictured during those early years are foundation members Eddie Buivids, Judy Lancaster, Charlie Soward, Diana Roberts (and daughter Mala) and Wally Wallace. Photo: Northern Star

Public debate intensified. Residents feared that closure of the landfill would mean transporting all household waste to Lismore, increasing both costs and inconvenience. Wastebusters therefore found itself advocating two complementary objectives: ending environmentally damaging tip burning while preserving a local waste facility for the community.

As debate continued, the campaign attracted increasing public attention. Local newspapers reported regularly on the issue, highlighting both the environmental arguments and the emerging proposals for a community-managed recycling depot. What had begun as a campaign against pollution was becoming a much broader discussion about the future of waste management. For Lismore City Council, the issue also marked the beginning of a philosophical shift. Increasingly, the debate shifted away from simply disposing of rubbish towards recovering resources and reducing waste before it entered landfill.

The change of thinking was reflected in 1993 when Lismore City Council commissioned consulting engineers Mackney Wade & Associates to examine future waste disposal options for the Nimbin district. The consultants concluded that:

- the existing landfill area was unsuitable for expansion;
- establishing a replacement landfill would be prohibitively expensive;

- the preferred long-term solution was a transfer station incorporating expanded recycling facilities; and
- Wastebusters had substantially reduced the volume of waste entering landfill through its recycling initiatives.

For Wastebusters, the report represented independent recognition of what volunteers had been demonstrating for several years.

Although a transfer station required an initial capital investment (estimated at about \$28,000 in 1994), it became the preferred long-term solution. Instead of burying rubbish on site:

- waste was to be placed into large bulk containers and transported to the regional landfill
- recycling facilities were to be expanded, and
- landfill operations would cease.

In October 1994 Lismore Council resolved to establish a waste transfer station at the Nimbin tip. Whilst the finer details were yet to be determined Council called for tenders to run the facility commencing at the end of the year when the existing tip was to be closed. Inevitably this led to increased charges for local ratepayers. From July 1995 a \$20 per annum charge was placed on rate notices which entitled users to 12 tokens to enter the waste transfer station at set disposal rates, \$5 per wheelie bin payable on site. MOs were to be charged \$20 for each house. Users from outside the area were to be charged a 50% higher disposal fee.

The landfill officially closed in early 1995 and rehabilitation commenced. Waste was thereafter transported to the regional landfill at Lismore, while recycling facilities continued to expand at the new transfer station. By 1998 Council had introduced a dedicated Transfer Station Charge to support its ongoing operation.

By 1998 the transfer station was sufficiently established that Council introduced a specific annual Transfer Station Charge for properties in the Nimbin area to help fund its operation. Although the transfer station ultimately became a Council-operated facility, its origins lay in the determination of a small group of volunteers who had challenged accepted practice and demonstrated that rural resource recovery could work.

From campaign to contract

Ending tip burning was only the first step. Demonstrating that a community-based recycling operation could function successfully over the long term proved an even greater challenge. By early 1991 Wastebusters volunteers were working regularly alongside Charlie Soward at the Nimbin tip. Charlie, then seventy-seven years of age, could no longer manage the growing workload alone. Without shelter or a defined recycling area, volunteers sorted recyclable materials, assisted tip users and gained an intimate understanding of how the site operated. What

had begun as an environmental campaign was becoming a practical demonstration of how resource recovery could work.



Photo: Brian Alexander

Judy and Wally at the tipface

Convinced that Nimbin needed its own waste transfer station they called for a Council-constructed recycling depot alongside a waste transfer facility. Fencing the site was deemed essential, replacing 24-hour access with supervised opening hours partly to stop hazardous waste and outside commercial dumping, but also reduce fire risk and potential theft of recovered materials. Initially understanding controlled access and fees might be permitted, Wastebusters was later advised this could only occur if management of the tip was put to tender.



Photo: Diana Roberts Bob & Aine and the temporary office come shelter

The challenge now shifted from planning to implementation. The question became who would operate the proposed recycling facility and under what conditions. Late in 1991, Council called for tenders to establish and operate the Nimbin Recycling Centre. For Wastebusters, this represented a significant milestone. The organisation had spent almost two years developing the very concept that Council was now seeking to implement. Volunteers naturally believed they were well placed to manage the recycling operation alongside the existing waste disposal facility. The tender process, however, proved more complicated than anyone anticipated.

Wastebusters' submission reflected the proposal it had consistently advanced throughout the campaign. The group proposed to operate the recycling depot while Lismore City Council retained responsibility for managing the landfill itself. From the volunteers' perspective, this distinction was fundamental. They had never suggested that a community organisation should assume responsibility for the operation of a municipal landfill. Their expertise lay in resource recovery, recycling and community education. Council's tender specifications, however, differed in important respects from the model developed by Wastebusters. As a consequence, the original tender process failed to produce an acceptable outcome and was abandoned.

For the volunteers, it was a deeply frustrating experience. After two years of planning, consultation and voluntary effort, the project risked stalling over contractual arrangements rather than any disagreement about the value of recycling itself. Yet, once again, the group refused to walk away. Rather than abandoning the project, discussions continued. The tender specifications were reviewed and amended to better reflect the respective responsibilities of Council and the community organisation. Early in 1992 revised tenders were called. This second process proved successful. Following further negotiations, Lismore City Council accepted the Wastebusters proposal and entered into a three-year agreement commencing in May 1992.

The agreement reflected an innovative partnership between local government and the community. Council committed:

- \$20,000 towards establishment costs;
- \$1,803 to cover the first year's insurance; and
- up to 90 per cent of gate fee revenue to assist day-to-day operations.

Wastebusters contributed something Council could not easily provide—an experienced volunteer organisation with practical knowledge of resource recovery, strong community support and a commitment to environmental education.



Photo: Diana Roberts The shed construction begins

The recycling depot quickly became a busy centre of activity. Steel, aluminium, cardboard, paper, bottles and other recyclable materials were diverted from landfill wherever practical. A small reuse area was also established, allowing building materials and household goods to find new owners rather than being buried. Long before "Revolve Shops" became common throughout Australia, Wastebusters had demonstrated the value of extending the life of materials through reuse. Giving those materials a second life not only reduced landfill but demonstrated that yesterday's waste could become tomorrow's resource. The same philosophy would have an even more enduring legacy.

Not every material had a market though. Plastic recycling remained extremely limited during the early 1990s, reminding volunteers that recycling alone could never provide the complete answer. The experience reinforced one of Wastebusters' founding principles: avoiding waste before it was created remained the most effective environmental outcome.

Throughout these formative years, the committee's commitment never wavered. Judy Lancaster, Wally Wallace, Eddie Buivids, Bob Hopkins, Gordon King, John Booth (JB), Kevin Soward and many other volunteers combined practical work at the tip with planning, administration and community education. Their willingness to persist through setbacks demonstrated that lasting environmental change depended not only on good ideas, but on people prepared to put them into practice. The original Wastebusters proposal had relied heavily on this volunteer labour pool and, like many community organisations, the group had assumed that the extraordinary goodwill demonstrated during the campaign could continue indefinitely. In practice, sustaining that level of volunteer commitment proved increasingly difficult. By 1994, Wastebusters advised Council that volunteer support had declined significantly and sought additional assistance to ensure the continued operation of the recycling centre. This was not a reflection of failure. Rather, it highlighted one of the enduring challenges faced by community organisations everywhere. Volunteers can inspire change, establish new initiatives and demonstrate what is possible.

Maintaining those initiatives over many years often requires a gradual transition towards more secure staffing and financial arrangements.

Although the transfer station ultimately became a Council-operated facility, its creation would almost certainly have looked very different without Wastebusters.

The group:

- demonstrated that rural recycling could work
- substantially reduced landfill volumes
- persuaded Council that local waste services should continue
- helped change the conversation from "dumping rubbish" to "resource recovery."

This was well ahead of mainstream waste management thinking in Australia.

The Legacy of Wastebusters

History often remembers organisations by how long they survived. By that measure, Nimbin Wastebusters might appear to have been a relatively short-lived community initiative. That would overlook its real achievement. Wastebusters changed the way waste was understood within the Nimbin district and, ultimately, across the Lismore Local Government Area. Its legacy lies not in the organisation itself but in the ideas it introduced, the partnerships it fostered and the practical changes it helped bring about.

When Wastebusters formed in 1990, waste management was still largely regarded as an engineering problem: collect the rubbish, bury it and move on. Wastebusters proposed a broader approach—one that recognised waste as a community responsibility and valued reduction, reuse, recycling and education alongside disposal. Many of those ideas, considered ambitious at the time, have since become accepted principles of modern waste management.

Perhaps the group's greatest contribution was demonstrating that local communities could become active partners in solving environmental problems rather than simply relying upon government to do so. Wastebusters showed that informed volunteers, working constructively with local government, could influence policy and help deliver practical environmental outcomes.

Education lay at the heart of that philosophy. Volunteers believed lasting change depended not simply on better infrastructure but on helping people understand the consequences of the choices they made every day. Although responsibility for waste education has since passed largely to local government, the principle remains unchanged. Infrastructure alone cannot solve the waste problem without community participation.

Many of the initiatives pioneered or encouraged by Wastebusters have since become commonplace. Resource recovery centres, transfer stations, reuse shops, composting, building-material recovery and waste education are now accepted features of local government throughout Australia. In 1990 they represented a very different way of thinking.

The modern Nimbin Transfer Station bears little resemblance to the old landfill. It now accepts a wide range of recyclable materials, incorporates a Revolve Shop and forms part of a regional waste management network. Yet its continuing emphasis on recovering resources rather than simply disposing of them reflects principles first advocated by Wastebusters more than three decades ago.

Interestingly, the importance of education has never diminished. More than three decades after Wastebusters first promoted waste education as an essential component of resource recovery, Lismore City Council again identified the need for greater community engagement following waste bin audits in 2026 that revealed increasing contamination within household recycling bins. The challenges may have changed, but the underlying lesson remains remarkably similar. Successful waste management depends not only upon infrastructure but upon informed and active participation by the community.

The questions first asked by Wastebusters remain as relevant today as they were in 1990. How do we reduce the amount of waste we generate? How do we encourage people to value resources rather than discard them? How can communities work alongside local government to achieve better environmental outcomes? While technologies and markets continue to evolve, those questions remain central to the challenge of building a more sustainable future.

Wastebusters never claimed to have solved the waste problem. Instead, it challenged a community to think differently. It demonstrated that ordinary citizens could influence public policy through careful research, respectful advocacy and practical action. It showed that environmental responsibility was not confined to governments or experts but belonged equally to local communities prepared to become part of the solution. That legacy belongs not to one individual, nor even to Wastebusters itself. It belongs to the many volunteers who believed that communities could build a better future simply by asking a different question.

An unexpected legacy: The Growth of Nimbin Building Materials

Amongst those recognising the potential of recovered materials was a local entrepreneur, Andy Kindermann. In 1995 Andy established a small operation specialising in second-hand building materials at the Nimbin Waste Transfer Station. From those modest beginnings grew Nimbin Building Materials, a business that would evolve over subsequent decades into one of the district's best-known suppliers of recycled and new building materials. While the business developed independently, its origins lay firmly within the culture of reuse and resource recovery fostered by Wastebusters during the early 1990s. Working alongside Ralph Mack and Gunther, Andy provided a wide range of resources for the many locals busy building their homes, often located on communities where members were always looking for recycled building products to reduce building costs.

Originally granted a 3 x 5 year lease, Andy was forced to relocate when Council advised they did not want to continue the arrangement. Andy's business had grown exponentially, as had its footprint at the waste transfer station. In 2011-2012 Andy relocated his business to the former timber mill site on Gungas Road. In 2015 Ralph purchased the business from Andy and in 2019 purchased its current Sibley Street site, always with the intention of relocating the business to a purpose-built facility. He worked alongside his sons, Ruben and Felix Mack to design and develop the site and in July 2024 it was officially opened.



Author's Note

As one of the principal organisers of Nimbin Wastebusters, the campaign fundamentally changed my understanding of local government.

In 1991 I addressed Lismore City Council during a public access session to present the case for Wastebusters. Carrying that responsibility on behalf of the community was daunting, but what struck me most was the debate that followed. It became apparent that some Councillors had little understanding of either the environmental issues involved or the practical alternatives the community was proposing. Rather than leaving frustrated, I reached a different conclusion. If better decisions were to be made, then people committed to those values needed to be sitting around the Council table.

By then I had already decided to stand for election to Lismore City Council later that year. Waste management became a central theme of my campaign and I joined with environmental advocate, now Professor Stuart White, on the Community Independents ticket. Although Stuart was not elected, the working relationship established during that campaign continued for many years.

From 1992 to 1999 I served as a member, and later Chairperson, of Lismore City Council's Waste Management Advisory Committee. During that period Council pioneered a number of initiatives that reflected the philosophy first advanced through Wastebusters, including kerbside organics collection, the Reusabowl program for markets and community events, and a stronger emphasis on waste avoidance, resource recovery and public education within Council policy.

Between 1992 and 1993 I also represented regional local government on the New South Wales Government's Local Government Reference Group on Waste Management. That experience provided valuable insight into the development of State waste policy and reinforced my belief that practical innovation often begins within local communities before being adopted more broadly.

Looking back, I now see Wastebusters as much more than a campaign to stop tip burning. It demonstrated that committed volunteers, working constructively with local government, could influence public policy and achieve lasting environmental change. The experience shaped not only my years on Council but also my continuing interest in documenting the history of community-led initiatives in the Northern Rivers.

My research is dedicated to the volunteers of Nimbin Wastebusters, whose belief, that the best waste is the waste never created, helped shape a more sustainable future for the Northern Rivers.

For further information: Aquarius Archives; Nimbin News Aug-Sept 1990; Northern Rivers Echo 19.7.91 pg3; NREcho 23.8.91; Northern Star Nov 1991; NStar 6.2.92; NREcho 7.2.92; NStar 25.2.92; NStar 24.4.92; Nimbin's Council Corner (monthly newsletter) Oct 1994, Feb 1995, Mar 1995.