*Argument 10*

*The following appeared in a memo from the mayor of the town of West Egg.*

*"Two years ago, our consultants predicted that West Egg's landfill, which is used for garbage*

*disposal, would be completely filled within five years. During the past two years, however, town*

*residents have been recycling twice as much aluminum and paper as they did in previous*

*years. Next month the amount of material recycled should further increase, since charges for*

*garbage pickup will double. Furthermore, over ninety percent of the respondents to a recent*

*survey said that they would do more recycling in the future. Because of our residents' strong*

*commitment to recycling, the available space in our landfill should last for considerably longer*

*than predicted."*

In this memo West Egg's mayor reasons that West Egg's residents are now strongly

committed to recycling, and projects that the city's landfill will not be filled to capacity until

considerably later than anticipated two years ago. To support this projection the mayor cites (1)

a twofold increase in aluminum and paper recycling by West Egg residents over the last two

years, (2) an impending twofold increase in charges for trash pickup, and (3) a recent survey in

which 90% of respondents indicated that they intend to do more recycling in the future. For

several reasons, I am not convinced that the mayor's projection is accurate.

To begin with, in all likelihood aluminum and paper account for only some of the materials

West Egg's residents can recycle. Perhaps recycling of other recyclable materials--such as

plastic and glass--has declined to the point that the total amount of recycled materials has also

declined. If so, then the mayor could hardly justify the claim that West Egg's residents are

becoming more committed to recycling.

Another problem with the argument is that an increase in the amount of recycled materials

does not necessarily indicate a decrease in the total amount of trash deposited in the city's

landfill. Admittedly, if West Egg residents previously disposed of certain recyclable materials

that they now recycle instead, then this shift from disposal to recycling would serve to reduce

the amount of trash going to the landfill. However, the mayor provides no evidence of such a

shift.

Moreover, the argument overlooks the strong possibility that the recycling habits of West

Egg residents are not the only factor affecting how quickly the landfill will reach capacity. Other

such factors might indude population and demographic shifts, the habits of people from

outside West Egg whose trash also feeds the landfill, and the availability of altemative disposal

methods such as burning. Thus regardless of the recycling efforts of West Egg residents the

landfill might nevertheless reach full capacity by the date originally forecast.

Yet another problem with the argument involves the mayor's implicit claim that increased

charges for trash pickup will serve to slow the rate at which the landffil is reaching capacity.

This claim relies on the unlikely assumption that West Egg residents have the option of

recycling--or disposing in some other way--much of what they would otherwise send to the

landfill. However, it is likely these residents have no practical choice but to send some refuse

to the landfill. The greater the amount, the less likely higher trash charges would have any

effect on how quickly the landffil reaches capacity.

Finally, the mayor provides no evidence that the survey's respondents are representative of

the overall group of people whose trash goes to the city's landfill. Lacking such evidence, it is

entirely possible that people inclined to recycle were more willing to respond to the survey than

other people were. In short, without better evidence that the survey is statistically reliable the

mayor cannot rely on it to draw any firm conclusions about the overall recycling commitment of

West Egg residents--let alone about how quickly the landfill will reach capacity.

In sum, the mayor's projection is simply not credible, at least based on the memo. Rather

than relying solely on questionable recycling statistics, the mayor should provide direct

evidence that the amount of trash going to the landfill is declining and that this trend will not

reverse itself anytime soon. To better assess the accuracy of the mayor's projection it would be

useful to know who besides West Egg residents contributes trash to the land fLU, and whether

the amount of trash those people contribute is declining or is likely to decline in the near future.