

The earth moves for Long Island Compost's burgeoning empire

SPREADING THE WEALTH

BY MARK HARRINGTON
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Charles Vigliotti stands atop a mountain of spongy black earth in an immaculate white shirt and blue blazer, gesturing down at the components of his 62-acre empire in Yaphank.

Below, as tractor trailers and earthmovers rumble among hills of compost and mulch, a machine resembling a giant bingo cage spins out screened mounds of black gold. Beyond that, a sea of loaded pallets wrapped in plastic stands ready for shipping to hundreds of garden centers at the height of the growing season, including those of The Home Depot on Long Island.

After a rocky start in a residential neighborhood of East Moriches, Long Island Compost has hit its stride - so much so that the company is eyeing replicating the operation in one other market on the Eastern Seaboard, Vigliotti said. It's even entertained the possibility of going public. For a company with 30-year roots in the bare-knuckle world of the traditional waste-carting business, the transformation has been nothing short of astounding.

"It's a recipe for success no matter how you slice it — they're that good," said Chris Mellilow, Nassau district manager for Home Depot, which has increased its business with Long Island Compost over the past half-dozen years. "They've really taken a large part of the business, and they're creating new growth."

Seven years ago, Vigliotti was driving home from the East End when he had the revelation of decentralizing his Long Island Compost operation to involve some 40 local farms to host composting piles, and thus vastly reduce



Long Island Compost President and Chief Executive Officer Charles Vigliotti.

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residential complaints that hounded him in East Moriches.

"I'm looking left and right, and I see farmland," said Vigliotti, who owns and runs the business with his brothers Dominick and Arnold Vigliotti. "I started working the cell phone, calling my brother Arnold, the DEC [state Department of Environmental Conservation], Cornell, the Long Island Farm Bureau."

By the time he arrived at his headquarters in Westbury, the idea had jelled into an executable concept. It took three or four months to secure the farm commitments, and the machinery and processes to create mobile compost-making crews. By the following spring,

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Cont....The earth moves for Long Island Compost's burgeoning empire

Long Island Compost was on its way to becoming an expansive operation and brand.

The 62-acre Yaphank plant proved a next crucial step in the expansion of the company, which has annual sales "north of \$30 million," Vigliotti said. "It gave us the ability to achieve economies of scale to run a successful business."

From his office in a central building in Yaphank, Ed Warner, director of operations, oversees a steady influx of landscapers trucking in beds full of yard waste that will soon become the stuff of Long Island Compost's growing product line.

Grass, leaves and other organic waste become compost; trees and branches become mulch; duck manure processed on two area duck farms becomes composted manure; and combinations of each become topsoil, planting soil, mulch and specialty soils. Nothing but the plastic bags and other debris screened from the compost goes to waste.

Landscapers pay a fee to drop off the yard waste at the Yaphank facility - a fee that's more competitive than typical town fees. Brookhaven Town itself drops off leaf, grass and tree debris in Yaphank, a service Vigliotti said saves the town around \$1 million a year. The company charges the town a fee, but "we don't get 10 cents of taxpayer money" in the form of government grants, he said.

The Westbury location processes yard waste from Oyster Bay Town.

In all, Long Island Compost processes more than 200,000 tons of organic material a year. Ninety percent is sold on Long Island, with the

balance going to surrounding metropolitan markets.

For the farmers who work with the company, the transition to composting on-farm has worked out well. "It's been a good thing," said Joseph Gergela, executive director of the Long Island Farm Bureau. Farmers who play host to compost mounds, called windrows, receive an annual lease payment from the company and a portion of the compost to use on their farms.

Gergela and Vigliotti acknowledge that some farms close to residential areas are leaving the

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program. "There's been complaints in certain areas," Gergela said. "The main thing is, as long as they're doing best management practices and complying with the DEC, we're happy."

Thomas Jurgielewicz, owner of the Jurgielewicz Duck Farm in Riverhead, had a duck-waste nightmare lifted from its shoulders when Vigliotti's company got involved in processing, at the suggestion of the DEC.

"My hat's off to those guys - they certainly helped us out a lot," said Jurgielewicz, who says Long Island Compost teams visit his farm weekly to keep the manure actively composting. He said he figures the farm breaks even or pays a slight amount for the service, but it's worth it, particularly as he plans to expand to another 20 acres. "If we had to do it ourselves, it would cost us," he said. In addition, the practice has reduced runoff polluting the Peconic Bay.

While most of the business involves compost, a growing portion deals with related products and services. The company runs two Great Garden outlets, which sell wholesale landscaping equipment, as well as plants, trees and related products. Vigliotti said the outlets, one in Yaphank and one in Westbury, make up around a third of sales.

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Such an expansion would require investment capital, which the company also is exploring through contacts with bankers.

"We're solicited on a fairly regular basis," Vigliotti said. Asked if the company would consider going public, he answered with a grin: "Maybe."

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