



**Saving Tax Dollars:
A Citizen's Report on
Recycling 2004**

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**The Recycling Alliance of
Philadelphia**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite early successes in implementing one of the nation's first mandatory recycling programs in 1987, Philadelphia's recycling program has continually lagged behind almost every other major city in the United States. Currently ranked as second to last, Philadelphia's recycling diversion rate hovers around 6%, while most other cities are achieving 15% and higher, such as Los Angeles, which is nearing a 30% residential diversion rate.

For years, recycling advocates in Philadelphia have tried to encourage the City to improve the recycling program citing benefits such as reducing air and water pollution, creating jobs and conserving resources. However, the cost of the recycling program prevented the expansion of the program and was an ever-present concern for City officials.

Now for the first time in its 17-year history, Philadelphia's recycling program is responsible for saving the City money compared to the costs of trash removal. This data was released from the Streets Department in March of 2003 and was publicized at the 2003 Budget Hearings by City Councilman David Cohen, the recycling law's original sponsor. Due to a favorable contract negotiated with Blue Mountain Recycling in the previous year and to other factors, recycling has been cheaper than trash removal for the last five consecutive quarters by as much as \$25 per ton. At this rate, the City is saving almost \$2 million a year through its recycling program.

The Recycling Alliance of Philadelphia recognizes that now is the time to maximize the amount of trash diverted into recycling in order to save even more money for the City during this budgetary crisis. For each percentage point that the diversion rate increases, the City can save an additional \$195,000. With that in mind, the Alliance recommends the following changes to the residential recycling program in order to increase diversion rates and save money:

- **Implement weekly recycling citywide.** Currently, only Center City and areas of Northwest Philadelphia have weekly curbside recycling pick-up. The remainder of the City has curbside recycling every other week. Pilots conducted by the City show that an increase in service leads to an increase in diversion, which will save money.
- **Enforce Philadelphia's mandatory recycling law.** Philadelphia was the first city to pass a mandatory urban recycling law. However, the law is not being enforced. Recycling enforcement has been proven to increase participation in the program and increase overall recycling rates, which helps the City save money. The City's own studies have shown that an aggressive and well-publicized enforcement effort will convince reluctant households to recycle. The more participants, the more recycling rates increase and the more money can be saved.
- **Create and implement a strategic recycling plan.** Philadelphia's recycling rate is now ranked eighth out of the nine major U.S. cities with curbside recycling programs and populations over one million. One cause is that the City lacks a strategic plan for the future. The last blueprint developed by the Recycling Office in 2001 is outdated and set to expire in July 2004. Furthermore, the Recycling Office has not come close to achieving the diversion goals set in this blueprint for fiscal years 2002, 2003, and 2004. A blueprint is a necessary piece to effectively educating the public. Objectives must include, among other things, the implementation of a strategic, neighborhood-specific recycling education and outreach plan citywide.

- **Provide support for recycling financially and morally.** Data from the Streets Department proves that recycling is cheaper than trash removal. With landfill fees expected to rise, the cost difference between recycling and trash removal will only increase in the near future. Facing a looming budget deficit, the City must maintain and even increase funding for programs that save money. Recycling is one of them. The current Recycling Program saves almost \$2 million per year. This money should be invested back in the program to hire expert personnel for education and enforcement. The investment should lead to increased recycling rates, and therefore increased savings.

In addition, Philadelphia's recycling program has suffered for years due to a lack of institutional support for it. There have been few outspoken supporters of recycling within City government since the program's inception. There is a need for leadership from the top down, with city officials setting an example for residents. The Alliance calls on Mayor Street, Philadelphia City Council, and the Streets Department to fully support the recycling program both financially and in practice.

- **Explore the expansion of materials collected curbside.** The City's residential curbside recycling program currently includes mixed paper, glass, and aluminum but does not include plastics, corrugated cardboard or yard waste. Other cities have successfully added other materials to their collection while maintaining cost efficiency. The Alliance is calling on the Streets Department to expand the materials collected curbside to include these materials. This change may save the City money, depending on the materials collected and the collection technology used.

RECYCLING IN PHILADELPHIA: A POLITICAL HISTORY

The advent of recycling in Philadelphia dates to the late 1960's, when fledgling citizen recycling projects were organized in neighborhoods around the city. Resisted from the outset by Streets Department officials, representatives of these projects organized Philadelphians for Recycling in the 1980's and carried their cause to Philadelphia's City Council. Embraced as an alternative to incineration, City Council passed City Ordinance 1251A, signed by Mayor W. Wilson Goode as the nation's first urban mandatory recycling law. The recycling ordinance set a goal of a 50% recycling rate in four years.

Recycling under Mayor W. Wilson Goode

Ordinance 1251A called for the appointment of a Recycling Coordinator by the Mayor to be directly responsible to the Mayor's Office. The ordinance also institutionalized public participation. It established a mayoral appointed Recycling Advisory Council (RAC) working in conjunction with an inter-agency Recycling Task Force to perform the lead roles in formulating the City's recycling policy.

The first Recycling Coordinator appointed under the ordinance was Alfred Dezzi, a seasoned administrator who had worked for the city for 15 years. His tenure was characterized by a consensus planning process based on thorough research of the issues and careful balancing of resources and institutional limitations with the policy recommendations of RAC. The resulting decisions were detailed, in writing, accompanied by specific goals, timelines and, when needed, sign-off by the Mayor or officials from appropriate City Departments.

Initially, this process proved successful. A statewide mandatory recycling law passed in 1988 provided financial support for recycling programs. In 1990, City Council adopted a solid waste plan that set a 40% waste reduction goal by the year 2000. From the fall of 1988 to the spring of 1994, the program grew from a 23,000 resident pilot program, to serve over 500,000 households. This was followed by the development of an aggressive commercial recycling program in June 1995. With all the elements in place, Philadelphia was poised to pursue major diversions of Philadelphia's trash. Unfortunately, this never happened.

Recycling under Mayor Ed Rendell

Despite Council's best intentions, Philadelphia's institutional resistance to recycling never subsided. As early as 1992, the Administration refused to expand the program beyond one third of the City's residents, despite city and state law to the contrary. Faced with a 1992 Notice of Violation of Act 101 from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and a fine in excess of half a million dollars, the City complied. Still, in the years that followed, the Administration resisted recommendations from the RAC and neighborhood activists and undermined efforts to develop and institutionalize recycling in Philadelphia.

In 1994, Mayor Rendell reassigned the recycling staff from the Managing Director's office to the Streets Department, over the protests of recycling advocates and in violation of provisions of the City's recycling ordinance. By 1998, the recycling office's planning function, which had been interdisciplinary, interdepartmental and independent of the Streets Department had been eroded to an expendable supplement to trash collection. Al Dezzi, Deputy Streets Commissioner for Recycling, resigned and most of the senior recycling staff resigned or transferred to other positions. The open planning process dictated by law with full involvement of RAC came to an abrupt end.

Recycling advocates increasingly concerned with the institutional disregard for recycling organized themselves together as the Recycling Alliance of Philadelphia (the Alliance). These advocates mobilized environmental and community leaders to express their concerns at the City Budget Hearings. Philadelphians were encouraged to write and call City Council. Advocates pressed relentlessly at the monthly meetings of the Recycling Advisory Committee and the Solid Waste Advisory Council.

Responding to the pressure, the Streets Department began a successful weekly collection pilot in two sections of the City in September 1998 and in May 1999 hired former Chester County Solid Waste Director Joan Batory to fill the position of recycling coordinator. Shortly after her appointment, Mayor Rendell directed Batory to prepare a plan of action for the recycling program. The plan was formally released, together with the results of the Recycling Pilot, with Joan Batory's letter of resignation at the end of the Rendell administration, in January of 2000.

Recycling under Mayor John Street

In June of 2000, the Alliance released the report: *Philadelphia Recycling Program at the Crossroads: A Citizen's Report on Recycling* at a press conference in June 2000. The report sought answers to why, after fifteen years with a well-funded program and talented staff, had Philadelphia only achieved a 6% recycling rate. The Alliance challenged Mayor Street to address the issues raised in the report, and pledged to work with the new administration to develop an improved program.

Mayor Street responded by appointing William Johnson as Streets Commissioner. Mr. Johnson was a former Division Manager for Waste Management in California and the first Philadelphia Streets Commissioner with waste management experience in over 16 years. Mr. Johnson, in turn, hired David Robinson as the City's Recycling Coordinator. Mr. Robinson was formerly the Recycling Coordinator for the City of Chicago.

In October 2000, Mr. Johnson stated his intentions to make major changes in the Streets Department's policy and practice for waste management. He set forth a bold vision for Philadelphia, modernizing the department and implementing practices, which, among other benefits, would produce "double digit recycling rates." In response, the Alliance secured a grant from the William Penn Foundation to study the Commissioner's proposals and develop a capacity to educate the public and elected officials.

Unfortunately, the first pilot launch to "test" dual collection was quickly undermined by administration and councilmanic support for residents who refused to participate. The effort was abandoned, and unfortunately, Commissioner Johnson resigned several months later for a position in the private sector. Long time Deputy Commissioner and Director of Sanitation, Clarena Tolson, replaced him.

Working with then Deputy Commissioner Tolson, David Robinson developed a three-part strategy to achieve "double digit recycling" rates for Philadelphia's curbside recycling collection program. The strategy called for a major promotion and active enforcement of recycling laws, increased collection efficiency and aggressive material marketing. A million dollar multi-media program was launched and work with crews was initiated to improve collection methods and uniformed SWEEP officers deployed to provide education and enforcement.

The strategy proved to be a winning combination. Recycling levels began to increase and for five successive quarters the cost for collecting material for recycling was less than collecting material for disposal.

SAVINGS ACHIEVABLE THROUGH RECYCLING

The Recycling Alliance of Philadelphia asserts that the City of Philadelphia can save several million dollars per year simply by increasing its residential recycling diversion rate.

In mid-2002 a new contract was secured with Blue Mountain Recycling, which paid the City for recyclables delivered to their facility on Grays Ferry Ave. This contract was extremely favorable to the City, paying more money for recyclable materials and thereby decreasing the overall costs of recycling. Since that time, the recycling program in Philadelphia has become cheaper than trash removal. In fact, data from the Streets Department shows that for the last five consecutive quarters, recycling has been cheaper than trash disposal by as much as \$25 per ton (Robinson).

In the past year, City recycling crews collected approximately 46,000 tons of recyclable materials, or 5.9% of the total amount of rubbish collected (PRO September 16, 2003). Since the cost of recycling a ton of recyclable material costs about \$25 less than collecting and disposing a ton of trash, the City currently saves about \$1.15 million each year through recycling. At this rate, for every percentage point increase in the recycling diversion rate, the City will save an additional \$195,000. Thus if the citizens of Philadelphia can double the diversion rate, the City will save an additional \$2.3 million annually, for a total of over \$4 million dollars.

The City may even save more than \$2.3 million if the recycling rate doubles, due to increased efficiencies in collection that are achievable when the trucks fill up over shorter distances on their routes and fewer trucks return to base with small loads. If we assume that doubling the recycling diversion rates to 11.8% results in a 10% increase in collection efficiency, the savings to the City could total \$3.2 million, \$2 million more than it is currently saving. This is a significant amount of money for a city facing unprecedented budget cuts to critical programs.

Doubling the recycling rate will require a strong continuing effort by the Recycling Office in education and enforcement, with emphasis on converting more households to recycling and increasing the recycling rate of materials from each household. Mixed paper is a particularly attractive target for conversion from trash bags to the recycling bins. Doubling the recycling rate is not unreasonable. Many other municipalities have recycling rates 10% and higher. Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago have all achieved 25% diversion rates or higher. At a 25% rate, Philadelphia could potentially save \$5 million per year.

In 1987 City Council set a recycling diversion goal of 40% recycling. Waste composition studies support this goal as achievable for a residential recycling program. When Philadelphia reaches this goal, it could be saving over \$10 million per year if current market prices of recycled commodities hold.

Landfill Fees and Cost Efficiency

Pennsylvania is the leading trash importer in the United States, importing 10.6 million tons of trash from 24 other states plus Puerto Rico and Canada. Pennsylvania landfill tipping fees are among the cheapest in the country, making it cost effective for out of state haulers to transport their trash here.

In recent years there have been attempts to decrease the amount of trash dumped in Pennsylvania since landfills have become a major environmental hazard, leaking pollutants into the sources of

drinking water and sending odors into communities. Because of federal laws, Pennsylvania can't ban imported trash, but it can raise fees assessed on each ton of trash dumped in our landfills.

A new proposal by Governor Rendell would add an additional \$5 per ton tipping fee to help fund environmental programs in Pennsylvania. If approved, this additional fee will make municipal trash costs even more expensive thus increasing the cost difference between trash removal and recycling.

Overall, landfill fees are expected to rise regardless of the Governor's budget plan. Trash contractors are expecting at least a 5% increase in tipping fees in the next few years. Some in the trash business predict landfill fees will surge from the current \$50 per ton to as much as \$80. Investing now in recycling will help avoid a major fiscal crisis for trash removal in the future.

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

How the City of Philadelphia Can Increase Recycling and Save Money

A. WEEKLY CURBSIDE RECYCLING CITYWIDE

Weekly curbside recycling pick-up allows citizens to recycle more often and has proven effective in significantly raising recycling diversion rates. Results of early weekly recycling programs in Philadelphia and the City's 1999 weekly collection pilot both show a significant increase in the amount of recyclables collected curbside, particularly in comparison to areas of the City that continued to have alternate week pick-up.

The Recycling Alliance of Philadelphia believes that by implementing a weekly recycling pick-up program citywide, Philadelphia will be successful in raising recycling diversion rates and lowering costs.

Early Weekly Recycling Efforts

Philadelphia first implemented a residential curbside recycling program in 1987, which provided households with weekly recycling pick-up. The program was first implemented in the northwest section of Philadelphia and expanded to include the lower northeast section of the City in 1989. Between 1987 and 1992, over 50% of recyclable material was collected on a weekly basis in areas of the northwest and northeast (Shaffer: June 18-25, 1998).

However, Philadelphia's budgetary problems forced the City to reduce recycling services in the fall of 1992 and the City cut back from weekly recycling to bi-weekly recycling. Prior to this shift from weekly to alternate week pick-up, the participation rate was between 70-80%. After the reduction in service, the rate dropped to 35% (Redd: Aug. 1, 1994).

1999 Weekly Recycling Pilot Program

In 1997, the Philadelphia Streets Department began holding discussions about returning to the weekly collection program that had been suspended in 1992. Beginning in May of 1999, the Streets Department initiated a one-year weekly collection pilot. The 1999 weekly collection pilot covered two areas of the City- Center City, and Northwest Philadelphia. Population in these neighborhoods equated to approximately 15% of Philadelphia's total population (Shaffer: June

15-22, 2000). The remaining 85% of the City's population continued to receive alternate week recycling pick-up.

The 1999 weekly collection pilot proved extremely successful in raising the recycling diversion rates in the three participating neighborhoods. In Center City, 184.47 tons of recyclables were collected in the month of May 1999 (Batory, 2000), as opposed to only 106.21 tons in May 1998. That marked a 75% increase in recyclables collected as a result of the switch from alternate week to weekly recycling pick-up.

Northwest Philadelphia also saw notable increases in collection rates as a result of the weekly collection pilot. In Manayunk, 508.71 tons of recyclables were collected in May 1999, as opposed to 391.14 tons in May of 1998, marking a 30% increase. In Germantown, 323.68 tons of recyclables were collected from May 1999, as opposed to only 210.14 tons in May of 1998, marking a 54% increase (Shaffer: August 12-19, 1999).

The success that the weekly collection pilot had in getting citizens to recycle more stands in stark comparison to the remainder of the City that recycled on a bi-weekly basis. In June 2000, it was reported that recycling collection in the three pilot neighborhoods averaged about 26.3%, as compared to 6.5% throughout the remainder of the City (Sampson: 2000). Contributing to the success of the weekly collection pilot was an extensive multi-media educational campaign that helped to spread the word to residents, living in the pilot neighborhoods, about the change in service.

During the 1999 pilot, the City also saw a decline in per ton collection costs, as a result of the increase in diversion rates (Sampson: 2000).

Weekly Recycling Today in Philadelphia

Currently, only Center City and the neighborhoods of northwest Philadelphia have weekly curbside recycling pick-up. The remainder of the City has curbside recycling pick-up on an alternate week basis.

There has been discussion within the Streets Department to expand weekly recycling citywide. In 2001, the Philadelphia Recycling Office published a three-year blueprint; a plan to increase the City's 6.3% residential recycling rate to 30% by the end of fiscal year 2004 through various educational and program initiatives. In the blueprint, the Recycling Office also set a goal of implementing weekly collection citywide by the end of fiscal year 2004. More specifically, the blueprint calls for the expansion of weekly pick-up to sanitation areas 2B and 6A (areas of south Philadelphia and northeast Philadelphia) in FY 02, to sanitation area 6B (the remainder of northeast Philadelphia) in FY 03, and citywide in FY 04.

The 1999 pilot showed a 19.8% increase in diversion rates in the participating areas. Assuming that the rest of the city responds to a weekly recycling program in a similar fashion, the citywide diversion rate could jump as high as 26%. At that diversion rate, the City could save \$5 million per year.

Despite the goals established in the 2001 blueprint, the Streets Department has yet to take concrete steps to implement weekly recycling in spite of the proven benefits demonstrated anywhere other than the areas of Center City, and Northwest Philadelphia.

B. ENFORCE PHILADELPHIA'S MANDATORY RECYCLING LAW

In January 2002, the City of Philadelphia Recycling Office hired the marketing firm of Elkman/Alexander & Partners to develop an education and advertising plan aimed at re-educating Philadelphia residents about recycling in order to increase overall recycling rates.

Elkman/Alexander began by conducting consumer research among self-described non-recyclers in Philadelphia in order to provide direction and to better understand the emotional and rational barriers to recycling.

These focus groups tested a variety of approaches on non-recyclers to see which message would be most likely to encourage them to recycle. Ten different strategic messages were tested, including messages such as "Recycling is a great way for you to be a role model" and "We know it's not easy to recycle, but it's well worth the effort." The study concluded that the message "Philadelphia residents must recycle. It's the law" was most effective in convincing residents to recycle (Dale Kramer 2002). People generally felt that the threat of a fine would motivate them to recycle. Other questions about being punished or fined for not recycling also yielded high responses.

Moving forward with this "punishment" approach, Elkman/Alexander & Partners developed a marketing plan based on enforcing the City's mandatory recycling code. A fictitious character named "Officer Daniels" was created to represent a Streets and Walkways Education and Enforcement Program (SWEEP) officer in marketing materials. Officer Daniels was a friendly but firm reminder that residents must recycle, or face a fine. Officer Daniels even received a cameo on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno" because of his resemblance to the show's bandleader Kevin Eubanks.

Elkman/Alexander created a three year marketing plan based on the Officer Daniels concept. Tactics for getting the message out included the use of brochures, billboards, TV and radio commercials, bus wraps, bill stuffers and press events. The campaign placed a special focus on traditionally non-recycling neighborhoods, where the message was needed most. Materials were also created in Spanish, Russian and Korean to target on-English speaking communities. The City invested \$3 million in this public education program.

In May of 2002, SWEEP officers began to issue warnings and \$25 tickets to residents who were found to have violated city recycling code. At the same time, the educational materials were distributed. Beginning in May, requests for recycling bins, phone calls to the Recycling Office and visits to the Recycling Office website all substantially increased. Residents who heard that a neighbor had received a ticket sprung into action to learn how they could avoid one. Diversion rates increased immediately as well, compared to the same month one year earlier.

While many environmental organizations and community and civic groups welcomed this new campaign, some residents were upset with the new enforcement of a 15-year old law. In fact, several calls were placed to City Council and to the Mayor's Office complaining about the tickets. Yielding to the pressure from these few non-recyclers, Mayor Street banned the issuance of recycling tickets a mere four months into what was intended to be a three year campaign.

The decision to stop issuing tickets effectively undermined the purpose of the campaign to motivate non-recyclers and increase citywide recycling rates. Up until the beginning of this marketing campaign, efforts to increase the City's recycling rate had been primarily focused on increasing the amount of materials recycled from traditionally high participation areas of the city, such as Center City and the Northwest. The ban not only wasted the money that had been

invested in the marketing campaign, but also took away the opportunity for low performing areas to catch up to other parts of the city.

Worse, the recycling diversion rates have actually slumped to rates lower than at the start of the campaign. The Recycling Office now has to switch gears yet again and begin a new education program. The lack of enforcement over the past several years sends the wrong signal to reluctant households: they can continue to flaunt the law with impunity and cause the City to lose \$25 or more per ton for the recyclables irresponsibly discarded as trash. It is ironic that the City has been complicit in this loss of savings by not enforcing its own regulations.

According to Streets Department data, diversion rates rose each month of the ticketing campaign and continued for five months after ticketing ended. In all, between May of 2002 and December of 2002, the diversion rate rose from 5.47% to 7.12%, a 30% increase. This data shows a strong correlation between enforcement of the law and participation in the recycling program.

C. CREATE AND IMPLEMENT A STRATEGIC RECYCLING PLAN

Since Philadelphia has continually ranked as one of the worst cities in the country in terms of diversion rates, it is only rational to look at what other cities are doing to keep their diversion rates up. Other cities that have sustained education and motivation campaigns of five years or more, such as Houston, New York and Chicago, have had dramatic and demonstrable results in curbside collections.

The last plan developed by the Recycling Office was titled “Integrated Recycling Programs Blueprint: Increased Recycling Participation and Diversion Through Education.” The specific mission of the plan, issued in 2001 was to “double the current recycling rate” in three years time. Specific steps included increasing participation in programs, expanding weekly collection, adding additional materials to the collection stream, improving the ability to enforce sanitation codes and improving customer service (PRO, 2001).

This plan is set to expire on July 1, 2004 and yet more than half of the goals have not been accomplished. In fact, the Recycling Office has not come close to achieving the diversion goals set in this blueprint for fiscal years 2002, 2003 and 2004. Without a realist and strategic plan, individual steps taken by the Recycling Office to promote recycling are often seen as unconnected and it is not often clear how each step will fall into place in order to meet the overarching goal.

At the very minimum, this plan should set goals for increasing diversion throughout the city and outline an extensive public outreach plan. Education of the public on recycling is the key in improving participation in the program. Residents who understand the importance of recycling are often hindered from participating because of a lack of information on what materials are collected, when to place them at the curb, and how to get a recycling bin. Enforcement of the law will help motivate those who do not see the importance of recycling. Yet those who want to recycle should not be prevented from doing so because of a lack of educational outreach.

D. PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR RECYCLING BOTH FINANCIALLY AND MORALLY

In spite of consistently saving the City money, the Recycling Office is continually understaffed and under funded. In fact, the Recycling Office is operating with so few staff that any further cuts forced upon them would likely lead to a decrease in services.

While it is hard to justify additional expenses at a time when the city is facing a looming deficit, the investment in recycling now can lead to increased savings in the very near future. With the current recycling contracts making recycling cheaper than trash removal and the likelihood of landfill tipping fees increasing, Philadelphia would be wise to divert as much of its waste into the recycling stream.

The Mayor's Budget earmarks the budget for the Streets Department, but does not specifically set aside a budget for the Recycling Office. It is up to the Streets Commissioner to determine how much of the Streets Department Budget goes towards Recycling. The Alliance urges the Streets Commissioner to give the Recycling Office a budget sufficient enough to allow increases in services which would lead to an increase in diversion rates and save the City money.

In addition, Philadelphia City government officials from the Mayor to City Council and down should all support recycling both in practice and in leadership. Recycling has suffered from a lack of institutional support for years, hindering a money saving program from saving even more.

Elected City officials need to set an example for their constituents by practicing recycling in their homes and offices. Information and materials about recycling practices should be distributed via constituent newsletters, websites and speeches. New residents should receive informational packets on how to recycle in their neighborhood. City Council members should take a vested interest in how the Recycling Program is operating and whether their constituents are participating. The Alliance urges all City officials to speak out in support of recycling and to play an active role in improving recycling in Philadelphia.

E. EXPLORE THE EXPANSION OF MATERIALS COLLECTED AT CURBSIDE

Since recycling is now consistently cheaper than trash removal, it makes sense financially to minimize the amount of materials in the trash stream by moving them into the recycling stream. While the cost of collecting some materials prevented the City from including them in the recycling program, the economics of recycling has changed dramatically in the last decade. Since these materials have to be collected either as trash or as recycling, it makes more sense to dispose of them in the manner that will save the most money.

Plastics

The City of Philadelphia has not collected plastics in the residential recycling program since 1992, citing that plastics made up 6% of the waste stream, but accounted for 45% of the space on recycling trucks, making it less cost efficient.

A lot has changed in the last twelve years, however, including the economics of plastic recycling as well as the abundance of industries that have switched from glass or aluminum containers to plastic containers. Currently, plastics make up almost 10% of the waste stream in Philadelphia, double the amount it was 12 years ago.

Across the country urban municipalities are collecting plastics and have altered their collection practices in such a way as to dramatically increase recycling rates and lower overall waste disposal. Philadelphia has changed its collection practices since 1992, opting for more trucks with compaction options, making plastics less of a collection burden.

In addition to increasing diversion rates by capturing more materials, adding plastics to the recycling collection system should also have a positive impact on other materials as well. A person walking down any street in any neighborhood on recycling day will see recycling bin after bin filled with plastic, as well as aluminum and glass. Too often, a sanitation worker will dump this entire bin into the trash because of the presence of a non-recycled material, thereby losing the other materials.

Corrugated cardboard

While lightweight cardboard such as cereal boxes are accepted, corrugated cardboard is not collected by the City at the curbside. Corrugated cardboard is the second most common recyclable material found in Philadelphia's waste stream, making up 5.6% of the total, or 36,288 tons a year.

Yard Waste

Yard waste has typically been overlooked in Philadelphia as a large source of recyclable materials. A survey of other material recovery programs in other cities found that those programs that exceeded 40% did so by supplementing recycling with the collection and composting of yard waste. A 1999 EPA report showed that 18 communities diversion rates of 40% or higher had an average 27% collection rate for yard waste. A yard waste program can be offered on a seasonal basis, depending on need.

CONCLUSION

While struggling since its inception to even be recognized, recycling in Philadelphia has finally come to an apex. For years, the recycling program was considered an expense, a service that the city provided to residents for a quality-of-life purpose. Yet recycling has now taken on a new definition, as a cheaper, smarter and more environmentally friendly way to dispose of trash.

Decisions about recycling within Philadelphia have always been dominated by economics. By negotiating a favorable materials contract with Blue Mountain Recycling, the Philadelphia Recycling Office has put its program in the spotlight. As a cost-saving program, recycling should be invested in and rewarded with an expanded operation.

Mayor Street's Budget Address has already indicated that certain cuts will be made in City departments. For example, the Mayor has decided to close a host of recreation centers and pools and cut funding for arts programs in order to save millions of dollars a year. If the City instead invested in recycling, several millions of dollars could be saved without closing one recreation center.

If there has ever been a time for City Council and the Mayor to become advocates for recycling, this is it. A program that is saving the City millions of dollars while operating on a shoestring budget must be acknowledged, supported and expanded.

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