

Citizen Engagement Corner

THE RECYCLING CONUNDRUM

League of Women Voters of Brookline

What do paper, cardboard, glass, metal and plastic have to do with China?

Brookline, along with many other communities, has adopted “single-stream” recycling – where residents put all recyclables in a single (blue) cart rather than separating items into paper and cardboard versus glass, metal and plastic containers. Deemed good for the environment and municipal waste disposal costs, recycling used to earn money for cities and towns. But this is changing.

The Problem: China has been the main customer for recycled materials, using them for manufacturing in its emerging economy. But Chinese demand has fallen, and in 2018 the government announced it would only accept recycling meeting a contamination rate so low that it has been impossible for worldwide suppliers to comply.

So, what are the main causes of contamination? Plastic bags and other tangles such as ropes and cords (which muck up the sorting equipment and cause facility shutdowns), food and garbage, clothes, treated paper (towels, tissues, cups and plates), and Styrofoam are the culprits. Material Recovery Facility (MRFs) are trying to get contamination out of their recycled materials, but it requires more time and employees. What cannot be extracted is considered a contaminant, and can prevent the rest of the recyclables from being sold.

Casella Waste, Inc. is Brookline’s MRF and serves 50 communities in eastern Massachusetts. Casella is urging its customers, including Brookline, to do more to eliminate contamination. Finding buyers for their bales of recyclables is a problem for Casella - India, Vietnam, South Korea and some other countries are buying some recyclables, but not in the quantity that China was buying.

There are repercussions throughout Massachusetts, causing some stockpiling of recycling. The state’s Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has issued some waivers allowing disposal of some of the recycling, although most of the waivers were for short periods and small amounts of material.

Recycling companies and municipalities are feeling the squeeze. According to Brookline's Department of Public Works, as recorded in the April 3, 2018, Solid Waste Advisory Committee minutes, "Brookline paid \$28,800 for [processing of] recycling in February. There is now only a \$6 difference in price per ton between trash [disposal] and recycling [processing]."

Some solutions: To mitigate the issue, DEP is trying to educate municipalities and residents to reduce contamination of recyclable goods.

DEP has implemented a Recycling IQ program. Volunteer inspectors go from house to house on recycling day and look through bins to determine the worst offenders. Those bins get an "Oops" sticker explaining what is wrong and why it is important. Brookline's Solid Waste Advisory Committee is utilizing the educational materials in some sections of town, emphasizing that plastic bags and plastic film (wrappers, bubble wrap, newspaper sleeves, sealed air packaging, etc.) should not be placed in blue carts.

DEP is also trying to expand grants and loans for recycling businesses and facilities.

Ultimately, municipalities and residents may have to pay more so that recycling companies can continue to operate & innovate.

The League of Women Voters has supported recycling initiatives for decades.

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.