

BACKGROUND SHEET: RECYCLING PRACTICES AND OPTIONS IN CLEVELAND HEIGHTS

This information overview summarizes certain discussions and fact-finding conducted by the Task Force in the course of its work during 2019. It was compiled by Task Force member Jordan Davis.

- Since the early 1990s the City of Cleveland Heights has collected recycled materials at curbside each trash day for the primary purpose of reducing landfill use. Recycling also helps to conserve natural resources, combat pollution, lower our overall carbon footprint and contribute to a circular, more sustainable economy. Cleveland Heights was an early and enthusiastic participant and promoter of recycling. Commitment to recycling among residents remains palpable in our city, although there is widespread misunderstanding of the current recommended practices.
- Recent changes in the markets for recyclable materials have reduced the overall financial returns for recycled goods. Recycling is currently at about a break-even point financially. Although the value of recycled materials rises and falls over time, we expect that most cities will have to pay to have their recycled goods processed in the near term. Recent contracts with haulers reward cities for having a cleaner, more compliant recycling stream.
- Contamination of the collection stream is one of the chief reasons for the drop in value of recyclables. It is the primary reason that overseas markets, especially China, are refusing to accept our packaged recyclable materials. Contamination of the recycling stream at point of pickup is estimated to be as high as 25% in some areas.
- Contamination has two facets. The first occurs when residents do not prepare their materials correctly, such as not flattening cardboard boxes, not properly rinsing or cleaning bottles and cans and allowing paper goods to get wet. The second involves placing unrecyclable items into curbside collection.
- Originally, residents sorted their recyclables in the home, separating paper, cardboard, glass and metals. For a time, city sanitation workers further sorted the recyclables by hand. Over the years, some plastics were accepted for recycling. Gradually, waste management companies offered the service of sorting all recyclables at a central location, allowing residents to “co-mingle” all paper, glass, cans and plastics for pickup in a single container. Today, all curbside recycling is sorted at a third-party Material Recovery Facility (MRF) operated by a private waste hauling company.
- Co-mingling, while seeming to be convenient for residents, has led to significant contamination of the recycling stream, as all kinds of materials that are not recyclable got put into the recycling bins or bags. The practice of “wish-cycling,” or including non-recyclables that people think could or should be recycled, is rampant. Contamination rates as high as 20+ percent have been cited by various sources.
- For thirty years, recyclables have been placed in clear or blue plastic bags for pickup. Clear bags permitted sanitation workers to view the bags’ contents to be sure they were recyclable and not trash. With the advent of the MRF model, the plastic bags have become a nuisance that impede sorting, clog machinery, and are not recyclable themselves. All MRFs

in the county are phasing out familiar blue plastic bags; all new pickup contracts will require automated pickup using curbside carts.

- “Carts” are two-wheeled rolling trash cans with lids, and typically come in 65-gallon and 95-gallon sizes. They are used for automated pickup of both trash and recyclables. Carts may not be practical for apartment dwellers. The cost of providing carts to all residents in the city can be subsidized by a number of different public and private organizations.
- ☐The use of curbside carts has been shown to increase the amount of recycled materials collected, and to potentially reduce the contamination rate (per CCSWD).
- Public education programs will be required to inform the public about proper practices for using curbside carts.
- ☐Community education and outreach about recycling must be sustained and updated on a continuous basis, as circumstances in the field are fluid and change often. There is widespread misunderstanding of what materials and items are and are not recyclable. A recent study showed that people recycle more correctly when they are better informed of the end uses of the materials they recycle. Similarly, an understanding of the processes of collection, sorting and materials reuse may foster improved compliance.
- ☐Educational content should be closely aligned with the efforts of the Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District. Messaging should be positive in tone and specifically targeted to all ages and demographics in our diverse community.
- ☐Enforcement mechanisms to insure recycling compliance may be required, such as warning tickets and fines. They have been implemented with mixed success in other communities. Best practice for enforcement and compliance has not yet been determined; this is an area where innovative approaches should be considered, especially in the roll-out phase of a new collection system. Some ideas include:
 - widespread education programs supported by on-going, multi-platform information dissemination
 - the use of “inspectors” to view the contents of curbside carts in advance of pickup.
 - carts with a high percentage of non-recyclable items would receive an informative notice
 - repeated non-compliance could be met with warning notices or fines
 - carts with a high percentage of non-recyclable items could be rejected at curbside
 - positive reinforcement of good recycling practices by residents; a “Two Thumbs Up” program or “Recycling Good Guy” club.
- ☐The MRF paradigm is ubiquitous and has many advantages, including the economies of scale, but may not be the optimal method for maximum material recycling in the long term. Alternate methods of sorting, collecting and selling recyclable materials should be monitored as potential alternative or adjunct methods to curbside collection. Dropoff site(s) for items not within the curbside strictures is one such idea.
- ☐The Cuyahoga County Solid Waste District was formed in 1989 to serve all 59 cities in the county by coordinating all waste and recycling information, advocating for reduced waste, assisting cities negotiate contracts, recommending best practices and more.

Residents who are interested in the current correct procedures for home recycling should consult their website www.cuyahogarecycles.org

- ☐ Other regional and national organizations exist to further public recycling and sustainability efforts. The Recycling Partnership is only one example.
- ☐ Although financial returns from recycling are at an all-time low, the environmental benefits are still tangible and beneficial. Some communities have ceased public recycling because of dwindling or negative financial benefits. However, there are many indicators that markets for recyclables will rebound, and new technologies are being developed all over the world to increase recycling efficiencies. To lose our recycling infrastructure would put us at a disadvantage when future innovative options emerge.
- ☐ There are concerned individuals and organizations who are able and willing to assist with community outreach to improve recycling. These could be enlisted as recycling ambassadors, educators or inspectors. Schools, businesses and other existing social structures can be included as partners in a recycling education program.
- ☐ The City could consider hiring a dedicated staff member whose specific focus is sustainability, as some other cities have done. A Sustainability Director could look both internally, at City operations and policies, and externally, at public programs. Duties could include analysis and research, investigating best practices, raising funds, strategizing programs in partnership with all City departments, helping to reduce City expenses, helping to develop eco-friendly businesses in the City, engaging a citizen advisory committee, developing marketing communications, initiating and encouraging public and private conservation programs, coordinating citizen action, and improving our community's overall participation in sustainability programs, including recycling. A passionate, forward-thinking, expert official with excellent communication skills could serve as our point person for sustainability initiatives, and put a visible face on our commitment to environmental responsibility.