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City hopes more will recycle with streamlined plan

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Houston is launching a yearlong pilot program that will allow residents to throw all recyclables - including glass - into a single, large bin, hoping to boost participation in the city's foundering curbside program.

The pilot program, to be announced by Mayor Bill White today, will be offered to about 10,000 households in eight neighborhoods. Residents will be given wheeled 96-gallon recycling bins, similar to the city-provided plastic trash bins, in which to dump every recyclable.

Currently, households with curbside pickup must sort recyclables into two 'streams': paper goods and containers (plastic and cans).

In addition to increasing the number of households participating in Houston's recycling program, officials hope the "single-stream" method will solve common complaints about the city's twice-a-month recycling program: that it's too complicated to sort the materials and haul them to the curb, that the bins are too small, that glass is not included.

"We're very excited," said Larissa Lindsay, a resident of one of the pilot neighborhoods, Old Sixth Ward. "I feel better that I can just throw it all in one bin and it's all ready to go."

The other pilot neighborhoods are Riverwood Estates, Lindale Park (West and East), Meyerland, Westbury, Pine Brook, Oak Brook and Pineloch. If the program succeeds, it could be expanded throughout the city.

The city hopes to save money on personnel since the new recycling bins can be picked up using the automated arm on the regular trash trucks.

Being progressive

The long-term goal is to increase recycling participation. A 2008 survey from Waste News pegged Houston with a dismal 2.6 percent recycling rate.

White has said the city's rate will approach 20 percent after the implementation of new programs. In January, the

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city began a wood waste recycling program for tree limbs and brush. In the spring, officials are planning to expand yard waste recycling through the use of biodegradable bags.

But single-stream recycling appears to be an increasingly popular strategy for improving participation. Fort Worth and Plano already have single-stream programs.

A single-stream system can more than double participation rates, said Pat DeRueda, president of Waste Management Recycling Services.

"It's just being progressive, it's trying to bring the solutions to the customers," said DeRueda. Waste Management provides dual-stream recycling to The Woodlands and some other nearby municipalities. It is studying whether to develop a single-stream processing plant in the Houston area.

The city's recycling processor, AbitibiBowater, has a plant in southwest Houston that cannot take single-stream tonnage. But it has plans to retrofit the plant, perhaps in 2010, to manage the material.

In the meantime, AbitibiBowater will ship the commingled material to its plant in Arlington.

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