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White hopes new plan will lift Houston's recycling rate from bottom of the barrel

By BRADLEY OLSEN Copyright 2008 Houston Chronicle

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TAKING THE INITIATIVES

The city's plan to boost its recycling rate involves several initiatives, including:

Education: A campaign to promote recycling in communities all over Houston.

Separation: Wood and yard waste to be collected separately.

Automation: A single-stream collection pilot program that will allow residents to put all of their recyclables in a wheeled 90-gallon bin for later sorting by machine.

Cessation: Cutting off curbside recycling for low-participating neighborhoods and offering it to areas that have been waiting years for the service.

Houston is poised to dramatically expand its recycling programs through a variety of initiatives aimed at ending the city's reign as the most wasteful major metropolis in the country.

The stepped-up effort includes a pilot program using advanced technology that will allow participants to heave all their recyclables — paper, seven types of plastic, aluminum, even glass — into a wheeled 90-gallon bin that can be hoisted on a truck and sorted with little human effort.

The City Council is scheduled to vote today on an ordinance that will set aside \$1 million of revenue from the sale of recycled commodities as a dedicated annual fund that can be used for the pilot program and a recycling education and outreach effort.

The funding and programs could push Houston's recycling rate above 30 percent in another year, city officials said, a far cry from the 2.6 percent cited in a trade magazine last year that put the city at the bottom of the 30 most populous metropolitan areas in the nation. That kind of improvement would push Houston above other large Texas cities, but still leave it far behind

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municipalities like Chicago and San Francisco.

"We've set some very ambitious goals," Mayor Bill White said Tuesday, noting that the city aims to reduce the amount of trash it sends to landfills by 20 percent in the next 18 months. "Whenever we use that space in the dump sites, we're creating a time bomb for the future in our city."

Environmental advocates greeted the plan with mixed reviews.

"It's all very nice, but it doesn't go far enough," said Ella Tyler, outreach and communication director for the Citizens' Environmental Coalition, a Houston-based group that serves as an information clearinghouse for more than 100 local environmental organizations. "I really don't think this will do enough to address the accessibility issue. It's still too hard for people who want to recycle."

Houston lags far behind other cities for an array of reasons, waste department officials say: The city does not have a "pay-as-you-throw" system that makes it worthwhile for people to recycle, Texas does not mandate recycling goals, land is more abundant and cheaper for garbage dumps, the recycling market is much less robust than in other cities, and there are no fees or taxes dedicated solely to recycling.

Houston spends \$2.5 million a year on recycling, only a fraction of what other major cities do, according to a 2007 survey in Waste News. The city has struggled to get more than a quarter of the 162,000 households eligible for recycling to do so. About 180,000 households are not eligible.

The city's low recycling reputation even prompted the San Francisco-based Progressive Reading Group to donate money for 276 bins, which White accepted last month.

Groundbreaking program

While the bins will help, a slate of programs initiated this year will do far more to boost recycling in the city, officials said.

Among the most groundbreaking is "single-stream automated collection," a new technology that will make it possible for Houstonians to put all their recyclables into one city-provided bin. The bin will be automatically emptied into a truck whose contents will be dumped onto a conveyor belt and poured into a machine that sorts the materials via photo sensors. The technology works well enough to pick through different kinds of glass, paper and plastic. The new collection method even will allow used motor oil and giant cardboard boxes to be recycled. If the ordinance passes, the program will begin on a pilot basis as early as November and serve 4,500 homes.

"Twenty years ago, it had to be done by hand," said Edward Chen, the city's deputy director of solid waste.

"Now, it makes our collection and processing much more efficient."

Recycling rate should climb

Counting recycled sludge, the city's recycling rate already has reached 18.4 percent, officials said. Once residents begin to recycle tree waste in October and yard waste in biodegradable bags early next year, that number should go up considerably.

Houston officials say another boost could come when the city cuts off neighborhoods that have failed to improve their recycling rates and begins serving areas currently on waiting lists for curbside service. The department has sent letters to more than 23,000 households warning them to improve their participation by the end of the year or be cut off.

"We certainly want the message to get out that we have made many positive steps," said Harry Hayes, who has led the city's solid waste department for a little more than a year. "We have to stop spending taxpayer dollars to dispose of reusable materials. To me, it doesn't make sense."

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