

Trash dump a barometer of economic crisis

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Elinor Coleman, left, helps Cathy Willis select buttons to update two sweaters. As the economy declines, more people find ways to make do with their old clothes.

WEIGHTY MATTER

- **Doubled:** From 1960 to 2007, the amount of stuff that Americans threw away nearly doubled, from 2.7 pounds a person daily to 4.6, according to the EPA.
- **Home trash:** In 2007, the EPA says, Americans produced 254.1 million tons of household trash. Of that, by weight, paper and paperboard (packaging) accounted for the most, 32.7 percent; glass for the least, at 5.3 percent.
- **How disposed:** 63.3 million tons of trash was recycled; 21.7 million tons composted; 31.9 million tons burned. The rest, 137.2 million tons, wound up in landfills.
- **Dumps:** There are 1,794 landfills in the United States, down from 20,000 in the early 1970s. The EPA estimates that they will be full in 20 years.
- **Holidays:** Between Thanksgiving and the new year, environmentalists say, Americans typically throw away as much as 5 million extra tons of trash.

WASHINGTON — Along with the stock market and the foreclosure rate, a less-heralded barometer has signaled the arrival of hard times: the landfill.

In an extravagantly wasteful society that typically puts 254 million tons of unwanted stuff at the curb to be thrown away each year, landfill managers say they knew something was amiss in the economy when they saw trash levels start steadily dropping last year. Now, some are reporting declines as sharp as 30 percent.

“The trash man is the first one to know about a recession because we see it first,” said Richard

Weber, manager of the Loudoun County, Va., landfill. "Circuit City's closing, so people aren't going there and buying those big boxes of stuff and throwing away all that Styrofoam and shrink-wrap ... and whatever they were replacing."

Trash volume has dropped so much, Weber said, that instead of running out of space in 2012, as had been projected, the Loudoun landfill will gain a year and a half or so of use.

"That's huge," he said.

Domino effect

It's all part of the cycle of stuff that people in the trash business say they've seen in every economic downturn since the end of World War II. People don't buy stuff, so there's less packaging — which typically makes up one-third of all landfill trash — to toss.

With a drop in demand, manufacturers make less, creating less waste. More vacant homes and fewer people in a community mean less trash. A stagnant housing market means less construction debris.

On tight budgets, people eat out less, so restaurants order less, so there's less to throw away. Landscapers are out of work, so there's less yard debris.

Even in Virginia, which takes in more out-of-state garbage than any state save one, trash men began noticing declines in late 2007 of 10 to 20 percent.

"And normally garbage is a pretty steady business because everybody wants to get rid of it," said Richard Doucette, a waste program manager with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. Now, he said, some landfills are laying off workers.

Finally, said Ben Boxer, spokesman for Fairfax County's solid waste management program, the economy is forcing people to heed the environmentalists' mantra: Reduce! Reuse! Recycle! Repair!

"A lot of these things that people throw away do have a valuable second life," he said, "especially for those who, now more than ever, are going to be facing difficult times."

Effects of uncertainty

Louis Johnston, an economist at the College of St. Benedict in Collegeville, Minn., combed through Commerce Department data and found that during recessions, people tend to spend 5 percent of their household budgets on repairs.

In good times, repair spending falls — in recent years to below 1 percent.

"People need to know what the future's going to look like in order to plan for it," Johnston said. "The more uncertain it is, the more likely people are to just stop or walk in place."

That dictum might be seen most clearly with the stuff we wear. Retail sales have fallen or remained flat for the past five months. People aren't buying new clothes or donating their old ones.

People aren't throwing clothes away, either. The EPA says Americans discarded 7 million tons of

clothing and footwear in 2007.

But this year, more people are following Cathy Willis' example. Willis had a trunk of old sweaters and chose to "update" them instead of tossing them, donating them or buying something new.

She found Elinor Coleman, an expert "rebuttoner," and on a recent day the two huddled over a pile of sweaters and scads of vintage buttons to reimagine her wardrobe.

"If I knew my job was more stable," said Willis, who works for a nonprofit group, "I'd probably be out buying new clothes."

But will the reuse and repair trend last in our throwaway society?

'Change in culture'

Julia Bovey, spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, says yes. "I think we're seeing a change in culture."

However, Chaz Miller, director of state programs for the National Solid Wastes Management Association, predicts that once good times roll again, so will the garbage. "We as individuals tend to be very acquisitive," he said.