

THE GREENING OF HOUSTON

The city's program is not compulsory, but some say residents, with a few incentives, could improve the system and the planet

Revisiting recycling

AMERICA'S RECYCLING REPORT CARD

32.5%

Waste recycled in the United States, a rate that has almost doubled in the past 15 years



52%

Paper recycled in the U.S.



31%

Plastic soft drink bottles recycled in this country



45%

Portion of all aluminum beverage cans recycled in the U.S.



JAMES NIELSEN / CHRONICLE

PAPERS OR PLASTICS: Donnie Birden tosses newspapers into a recycling truck July 8.

7 8 9 10 11 12
TIMELINE
1986

There was one curbside recycling program

2006

There were about 8,660 curbside programs

Source: Environmental Protection Agency, National Recycling Coalition

By **CAROLYN FEIBEL**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

THE Houston Chronicle you hold in your hand contains seven previous Chronicles.

Or maybe 20. The exact sources of its reincarnation were dissolved together in a pulping kettle in Alabama. This page also could contain your gas bill, a celebrity mag and a sushi menu.

Newsprint is a recycling success story. Almost 88 percent of newspapers get recycled, the EPA says. If you have curbside pickup in Houston — and that's a big if — the paper gets compacted and trucked to a sorting and baling plant on the southwest side, where it takes a ride through spinning wheels to sort out the cardboard and along conveyor belts so workers can



pluck out stray plastic bags.

In Alabama, the mixed paper is watered down and filtered. Magnets suck off the paper clips and staples — they get new lives as car parts and construction steel — and

skimmers remove the old ink. The creamy slurry gets sprayed onto screens, dried, pressed and rolled. It's back in your hands within two weeks.

Ghosts of previous products can be found all over the city. You drink Gatorade, the bottle ends up in hotel carpeting. Milk jugs become car bumpers. Other plastics live on as playground equipment, garbage cans, and flower pots. Beer bottles become beer bottles, but glass also can migrate into insulation or the reflective striping

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along highways.

"Everything that comes out of your home or office is really a material stream that can be recycled or composted or even reused," says Darryl Lambert, who manages the AbitibiBowater sorting center where Houston sends its recyclables. "There's very little true, true waste."

That may be, but that does not mean Houston recycles as much as it could. Some residents blame the city's modestly scaled curbside program, which offers residents no financial incentive to recycle and serves only 47 percent of the 342,000 homes that get public trash service. But the city says that more recycling companies need to come to Houston, build processing centers, and ramp up the market for used goods.

"Houston is a virtual gold mine of recyclable materials; it's just a matter of companies mining that material," said Harry Hayes, solid waste director.

"You need to build it, and I think the material will flow," Hayes added.

A 2 percent rate

Recycling surveys are notoriously fuzzy, relying on self-reports based on inconsistent measures. But one estimate puts Houston's rate at a dismal 2 percent of all municipal solid waste — the nonindustrial and non-construction waste generated by homes, schools and businesses. The city claims it is slightly higher, if you count efforts in more than 50 city buildings, but officials acknowledge that recycling is the city's "growth opportunity."

"I think our current levels of recycling are unacceptable, and we need to do more," Mayor Bill White said recently.

The city is on track to push its recycling rate toward 20 percent, White said.

A citywide pickup program for tree waste goes into effect in

the fall. That could keep 90,000 tons out of the landfills each year. Yard-waste composting could grow, with plans for a biodegradable bag system. The administration will add 25,000 homes to the curbside program, although that still leaves dozens of neighborhoods on the waiting list.

The typical American creates 4.6 pounds of waste every day. At Houston's sorting facility, collected paper products speed along a conveyor belt, headed toward a paper mill instead of a landfill.

It's a mesmerizing waterfall of waste: Blue Bell cartons, Sports Illustrated magazines, Chronicles, boxes of Special K and Lean Cuisine and Cheez-Its, a collage-like record of pleasures and perishables.

The city's approach is surgical: dissect and analyze waste streams and recycle only where the city can get "the biggest bang for its buck." Neighborhoods with low participation will lose the service next year.

Major sectors of the city — the Medical Center, downtown skyscrapers and apartment buildings — manage their own waste and aren't mandated by the city. Other cities, like New York and Portland, Ore., require businesses and private haulers to do some recycling, but Houston leaves it up to them.

"Nobody is prevented from doing any of this," White says.

Critics say that approach, based on volunteerism and education, is not enough.

"You are not going to educate the majority of people into recycling," says Leo Gold, a financial adviser who also hosts a talk show on KPFT-FM (90.1). "The others have to be induced."

"It took \$4-a-gallon gasoline for people to get fuel-efficient automobiles, and it's going to take creative pricing to get people to do recycling," Gold added.

"Pay to throw" plans encourage recycling by charging for garbage disposal. The less you

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PILING UP: Oscar Alfaro, left, and Charlie Leeper sort through paper and cardboard last month at AbitibiBowater. The typical American creates 4.6 pounds of waste every day.

put in your trash, the less you pay. Cities such as Fort Worth, Seattle, and San Jose, Calif., increased recycling this way.

The pay to throw plan

In Fort Worth, residents get a free 64-gallon recycling cart with a cover and wheels. They pay a monthly fee for a garbage cart: less for a small one, more for a larger one. The city claims a 22 percent recycling rate.

Pay to throw programs are in 7,100 communities covering 25 percent of the U.S. population, says Lisa Skumatz, a Colorado-based consultant on energy and recycling. Historically, Houstonians have rejected such fees.

In Hartford, Conn., officials are piloting a program that uses bar-coded bins. Recycling is weighed upon pickup and the resident given credit. Points can be redeemed at area stores.

Although recycling does cost money upfront, it may be getting cheaper over time. Recycling rates took off in the 1990s, but increases have slowed in this decade, says Ed Skernolis, director of policy and programs at the National Recycling Coalition in Washington, D.C.

Skernolis speculated that people got distracted by the war and economy, and communities

instituted programs to get at the "low-hanging fruit" of recyclables but stopped there.

Many predict an upsurge in recycling: commodity prices have gone up; businesses are going green, which expands the market for recyclables; and global warming concerns have reinvigorated the country's environmental consciousness.

A matter of money

In Houston, recycling rates hinge on the political will of elected officials and residents. In the words of Elena Marks, the city's director of Health and Environmental Policy, "We can do anything our taxpayers want to pay for."

Officials say recycling could become cheaper if volumes increase or if more processors open facilities in the area.

The city's calculations show that recycling costs taxpayers \$1.32 a month per home serviced, but regular garbage costs \$8 a month per home. Landfills still are comparatively cheap here, but that is changing: Landfill fees have increased 50 percent since 2000.

AbitibiBowater, the city's vendor, pays about \$55,000 a month for the city's recyclables. That revenue will increase as

commodity prices rise. The company has pledged \$15 million to build a new "single-stream" plant here, one that would allow residents to mix their papers and containers together. That would increase sorting speed and save money, as bottles and cans now must be shipped to a sorting facility in Arlington.

But the firm is waiting for a sign from the city and the surrounding region that people want to do more.

"We can build the plant, but if the public isn't educated and we don't have the volume, it's not justified," said Fred Ecoff, AbitibiBowater's regional manager.

Jennifer Armentrout, a recycling advocate who lives in the Barker-Cypress area, said people just need a little push.

Armentrout has no pickup service, so she collects material from four neighbors and a local wine bar and takes it to a depository.

"Once they get used to recycling, they want to do more," she said of the neighbors she's converted to her cause. "It's a gateway into environmentalism."

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NO CURBSIDE PICKUP? WANT TO RECYCLE GLASS?

Residents outside of Houston can search by ZIP code at earth911.org for drop-off sites. The following Houston depositories accept recyclables, including glass that curbside service won't pick up. Hours and days vary widely, see www.greenhoustontx.gov/materials.html or call 311.

- 5900 Westpark Consumer Recycling Center (also tires, batteries, oil, paint, anti-freeze and scrap electronics)
- 5565 Kirkpatrick (also heavy trash, tires, oil)
- 2240 Central (also heavy trash, tires, oil)
- 5100 Sunbeam Depository (also heavy trash, tires, oil)
- 6023 Windfern Depository (also heavy trash, tires, oil)
- 3602 Center
- 1200 Brittmoore (Vista Fibers facility)
- 1245 Judiway (glass only)
- Kingwood Park & Ride 3210 W. Lake Houston Parkway
- Ellington Field Highway 3, at Dixie Farm Road
- Participating H-E-B stores — see Web site (no glass)

More options

Two additional sites do not accept cans, bottles or paper products, but do take household hazardous waste such as used oil, antifreeze, pesticides, batteries and used electronics.

■ Environmental Service Center (South) at 11500 S. Post Oak

■ Environmental Service Center (North) at 5614 Neches, Building C

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Dos, don'ts of Houston recycling

■ Envelopes are OK, but greasy pizza boxes aren't

Stop arguing with your spouse about whether it's OK to recycle cardboard milk and juice cartons (it isn't). Stop wasting time tying up newspapers or separating cans from bottles (you don't have to). Here are the facts about recycling in Houston:

Q: Are windowed envelopes OK to recycle?

A: Yes. You don't need to strip out the plastic window or remove staples from paper.

Q: What kind of cardboard is acceptable?

A: Corrugated cardboards, like moving boxes, are fine. So-called "paperboard" — the thin cardboard used in cereal boxes, cracker boxes and Kleenex — also is acceptable. Pizza boxes are not OK, nor are other boxes with grease or food residue.

Q: What types of plastic are acceptable?

A: The city recycles plastic bottles with the numbers 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7 on the bottom. Plastics 4 and 6 will be thrown out later if you happen to recycle them. Flattening a plastic bottle is suggested to save space in the bin, but it's not required. Removing tops from bottles helps the truck compaction process.

Q: What about yogurt cups, butter tubs and other plastic food containers?

A: They're fine, as long as the numbers are 1, 2, 3, 5 or 7. You also may recycle detergent jugs.

Q: Bundling newspapers with twine helps me carry them out of the house. Are bundled stacks of paper OK?

A: Bundling with twine slows up the processing. Use a paper grocery bag to hold stacks of newspapers and papers instead. Or stack loose papers inside a bin.



JULIO CORTEZ / CHRONICLE

SORTING PROCESS: Jose Salinas sorts paper and cardboard as it passes on a belt at Houston's AbitibiBowater facility last month. Residents don't need to separate their recycled materials in advance.

Q: So, paper shopping bags are recyclable?

A: Yes, but plastic grocery bags are not. They tangle up the equipment.

Q: Why isn't glass collected?

A: Because compactor trucks shatter the glass, mixing the different colors together. The market is poor for mixed glass. Also, shattered glass complicated the sorting process for other materials. The city was forced to pay the recycler to process the material, rather than getting revenue for it, as it does now.

Q: If I want to recycle glass, can I bring it somewhere?

A: Drop-off depositories sort the glass by color, so it remains marketable.

Q: Do soda cans need to be rinsed out?

A: It's always best to rinse food and beverage containers to prevent odors and insects, but rinsing is not required for the recycling process.

Q: If I have a clean ball of aluminum foil, is it recyclable?

A: Yes, if there is no food residue on it.

Q: Do I need to separate paper, plastic, and aluminum?

A: No, all containers — bottles and cans — can be commingled. They are placed together on the collection truck and separated later at the processing center. But keep paper items separate from containers, either in a paper grocery bag or stacked in their own recycling bin.

Q: Can I get more than one bin? What is the maximum?

A: Recycling bins are provided free to residents in curbside areas. To obtain a second bin, call 311. To control costs, a customer should request no more than two. However, you can place overflow items in a one-way container, such as a cardboard box or paper bag.

Q: How can I get recycling pickup in my neighborhood?

A: There is a waiting list of 25 neighborhoods, or about 250,000 homes. Cost is the main factor limiting the program, so the mayor and City Council would have to vote to spend more money to expand the program. Contact your district council member, council members at-large, and the mayor's office.