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FEATURED

Home offices, take-out food containers disrupt recycling

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Dec 1, 2020





One of Rick Baird's retrofitted recycling bins, with a strap to prevent contamination and a hole for users to insert recyclables.

Pat Christman



The COVID-19 pandemic has upended normal life for many, and the local recycling market has not been spared from its effects.

Rick Baird had to put some of his recycling projects on pause because of city budget concerns after the pandemic hit. While he plans to pursue these initiatives later, the Mankato city environmental sustainability coordinator had to get creative and find cheaper ways to improve local recycling.

Baird built new bins equipped with recycled lids designed to capture bottles and put these bins at three parks in the city. The intent is that the bottle-shaped hole on top of the bins will reduce how much trash ends up in the recycling.

The pandemic has changed what material is being recycled and also how experts educate the public on recycling.

With many people working from home, there has been an increase in the use of take-out and shipping containers and a decrease in office paper. This affects how much of these materials are recycled and available to make new items.

On the education side, Blue Earth County's Recycling Education Committee isn't able to visit classrooms or speak to groups anymore. This inability to educate people in person comes at a time when it's important for people to recycle right.

The recycling market is still recovering from when China stopped accepting most U.S. plastics two years ago. Prior to the ban, 70% of plastics collected for recycling in the U.S. were sold and shipped to Chinese processors.

Local recycling markets were flooded with recycled material that had previously been shipped to China. This caused the value of some materials such as glass to plummet and made the market for recyclables more competitive. The competitive market put pressure on local haulers to reduce how much non-recyclable material ends up in the stream.

Gone are the days when the message was to recycle as much as possible. Since the ban, there's been an increase in educational efforts to encourage people to recycle right.

Recycling is a big industry in the area; on average about 40% of reported waste generated annually in Blue Earth County from 2016 to 2018 was recycled, according to a [report by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency](#). About half of the reported annual waste in Nicollet County was recycled during that period.

Education challenges

The biggest problem the Blue Earth County Recycling Education Committee works on is addressing the contamination of recyclables and teaching the community about what should and shouldn't go in the blue bin.

Jane Haala, chair of the committee, says most people want to do the right thing and recycle. It is just confusing knowing what actually is recyclable. One wrong item put in the recycle bin, such as a plastic bag or a jar with peanut butter in it, can mess up the whole load.

The pandemic has made it more difficult to pursue some educational initiatives such as visiting classrooms. The county recycling committee temporarily halted its meetings because members are not able to meet in person. Haala said without these educational efforts, it's hard to reduce the contamination in the recycling stream.

Despite the pause on events, local county and city officials are still using social media and their websites to get information out. City websites offer information about common items that should and should not be recycled. [Blue Earth County has an online tool where specific items can be checked.](#)

Before China stopped accepting U.S. recyclables, educational messages encouraged people to recycle as much as possible, a term called "wishcycling."

"For years we were promoting trying to get people to recycle as much as you can. It seems a little strange to us to now tell people to not recycle as much," said Dave Kronlokken, waste and recycling supervisor for Blue Earth County.

Pandemic waste uptick

With restaurants repeatedly closed to in-person dining and many people working from home, there's been an increase in online shopping and take-out meals.

It can be confusing to know how to dispose of the containers these to-go products come in. While cardboard is recyclable, Amazon envelopes with the plastic film need to be recycled at local stores that participate in plastic recycling programs. Most take-out containers do not belong in the recycling bin because they are contaminated by food — the same reason why pizza boxes are not recyclable, although they are accepted in the composting program.

The use of personal protective equipment such as masks, gloves and plastic face shields to protect against COVID-19 have also greatly increased waste. Local experts say these items are contaminated after use and should not be put in the recycling, even if they are plastic or paper.

A changing market

Sharon Schriever, executive director for the Southeastern Minnesota Recyclers Exchange, said the pandemic has affected the volume of material being recycled and the value of these recyclables.

More demand for cardboard boxes has increased the value of recycled cardboard, and a reduction in the use of office paper brought up its worth as well for the first few months of the pandemic.

Many offices and schools closed their doors in March due to stay-at-home orders. This move hit toilet paper makers especially hard, during a time when toilet paper was in high demand as people prepared to hunker down for the pandemic.

As more closures occurred, the toilet paper industry lost access to cheap recycled paper typically used to make toilet paper rolls.

With less paper being recycled, more trees have to be cut down to produce pulp for the rolls. According to the Bureau of International Recycling, recycled material such as office paper supplies 40% of the global raw material needs and helps reduce natural resources such as trees needed to create products.

Efforts continue

Despite the pandemic making it more difficult to implement new projects, Baird's efforts to improve recycling in Mankato have not slowed.

The new recycling bins are part of a pilot program in Alexander, Stoltzman and Thomas Parks that Baird is rolling out to reduce trash contamination. If the three prototype bins are successful, he wants to expand and put them at other city parks.

He is also planning other projects to pursue once funding is available. One involves finding a way to capture shredded paper, which can't be recycled normally because the shredded strips clog the machines that sort recyclables.

For now, he is educating groups about recycling on Zoom and shares information through city newsletters.

"Education is a useful tool we are trying to utilize as much as possible," he said. "It doesn't take a budget to educate people on things to recycle and not to recycle."

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