

The Public Ought to Know: Cost-effective recycling is within NYC's reach

By Corey Bearak

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Our city's recycling program always frustrated me. When you work on legislation that everyone hails as a landmark law, you feel good about yourself and whatever modest contribution you make to the cause. When the City Council finally passed The New York City Recycling Law in 1989, I thought trash would soon cease to be a problem and a burden.

Yet rather than witness recycling's promise, we observed one city administration limp forward, the next pay lip service for eight years and the current administration preside over the gutting of this law.

Recycling offers a cost-effective alternative to traditional garbage collection. When political considerations dictated the closing of the city's last landfill at Fresh Kills on Staten Island, we faced two alternatives: reliance on expensively shipping our trash to landfills in other localities and states; or recycling including waste reduction. Incredulously, the Giuliani administration schemed an elaborate trash export plan rather than aggressively promoting recycling.

Trash export requires transfer stations so waste can be shipped to landfills. And the communities "hosting" these waste stations experience more truck traffic and pollution. (Recall the article on diesel emissions two weeks back.)

This experience represents another example of how mayors can overwhelm the legislative branch so bad policy occurs. Until we amend the City Charter to address this power imbalance, only a public outcry can embolden and empower the City Council to really effect the policy change needed.

Most New Yorkers know the recycling program faces problems and sometimes confuses us. Last year the city told us to stop recycling glass and plastics. Last month we resumed recycling plastics but not glass, which we'll again recycle next spring. No doubt the program lost momentum, but resilient New Yorkers will again achieve high levels of recycling in most neighborhoods.

Arguments against recycling focused on cost. Officials and naysayers questioned the higher collection costs and the need to still pay processors to take the "recyclables." These folks either failed algebra or never took this basic

mathematics course now required of most high school students. The basic equation requires you take collection and disposal costs for general trash and compare it with the collection and processing of recycling.

While the Department of Sanitation may find it cheaper to collect everything together, it then has to truck the trash to a transfer station and ship it to a landfill where we get the right to pay dearly to other communities who accept our trash, we hope, in “sanitary” landfills that meet environmental and health standards.

As run by the city, recycling may cost to collect, but it significantly reduces disposal costs. The city can make recycling collection more cost-effective. I remember a time when I argued it made no sense for the city to use three shifts to collect trash, recycled paper and recycled containers (glass, plastics and metals).

Sanitation officials claimed it could not be done and that they could not devise a dual-compartment truck to simultaneously pick up recyclables. The dual trucks now routinely collect paper and containers on one run. Three shifts became two.

Interestingly, the city failed to take advantage of the recycling program’s other benefit: Routes for regular trash no longer filled up trucks as much. To date, the city has not taken steps to ensure that the trucks get filled up to the max with trash, thereby reducing the number of collection routes needed for trash collection; and frankly, it ought to take the same approach when it collects recyclables.

It simply requires negotiations with the union that represents the Sanitation workers. It makes sense to pay workers more to do more and share with them some of the program savings they secure for us. In economics 101, they call that productivity.

In the meantime, another missed opportunity to work with a union that time and time again agreed to productivity initiatives that would have improved services, lowered costs and saved taxpayers money. Anyone remember three workers on Sanitation trucks?

Also, the city should collect yard waste — grass clippings and fallen leaves — rather than mix this stock for compost with regular trash. It should reinstate and expand buyback centers, as envisioned under Local Law 19, to increase recycling in lower-income neighborhoods, including many city housing projects.

Finally, a word on one proposal that works in the ivory tower but not in the real world. Some former Department of Sanitation bureaucrats wanted us to pay for the trash we dispose, saying it may induce us to improve our recycling and perhaps maintain home composting bins. It sounds like a backdoor tax increase. Remember my inaugural column on water rates. Beware any proposals for a

Waste and Recycling Authority.

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