Recycling can turn trash into products, profits for processors, manufacturers

By Rick Dandes rdandes@dailyitem.com  14 hrs ago

In the world of recyclables, modern-day science meets capitalism.

Through the wonder of technology and chemistry, a “processor” can take that used plastic soda bottle you dropped off at your local municipal recycling center and sell it to a “re-manufacturer,” who can turn it into carpet, backpacks, sleeping bags, or ski jacket insulation. Discarded newspapers become egg cartons, sheetrock, or other newspapers; glass bottles become fiberglass; office paper can become toilet paper, paper towels or napkins; metal cans turn into bike parts.

“Your throwaway stuff is making money for someone,” said Lynn Rubenstein, president, Northeast Recycling Council, Brattleboro, Vt. “What happens,” Rubenstein said, “is that that material you recycle is eventually taken to a processor, also known as a MRF, or Materials Recycling Facility. This generally involves a truck taking the material to the MRF. They sort the material, crush it into large bales of concentrated materials, then market it and sell to a manufacturer.”

The Valley municipalities that serve as recyclables “collectors” have arrangements with Lycoming County Resources Center, a major processor in the area, said Chuck Beck, consultant to and former business manager of Milton Borough.

Municipalities like Milton and East Buffalo Township pay to have Lycoming take their recyclables.

“We pay them $75 a pull — translation: by the container that has been pulled. In it is separated product, say plastic, cardboard, glass, magazines,” Beck said.

The $75 a pull is what East Buffalo Township pays to Lycoming as well, said Stacey Kifolo, township manager.

“We serve our county,” said Lauren Strausser, recycling coordinator for Lycoming County. “But we also have contracts with municipalities in Union, Snyder and Northumberland counties and we have been working with them for a number of years. We go to their drop-offs and pick up the recyclables.”

Municipalities find it hard to operate their own recyclable processing, she said, “particularly because the market is down. A lot of recycling centers have been closing down. We are able to help them out by bringing the recyclables to our facility to process.”

When Lycoming gets the material, they process it, separate it and crush it into a bale.

“When we have a load of a material, we allow different brokers, or middle men, to bid on it and see who has the highest price to sell it to,” Strausser said.
Lycoming works with multiple brokers. "We try to sell to local manufacturers if we can," she said.

Plastic bottles are separated by numbers. No. 1 plastics are soda bottles. No. 2 plastics are colored plastics like laundry detergent bottles.

The market value of all recyclables changes all the time, Strausser said.

"We do sell overseas," she said, "although China is not so much of a buyer anymore for us."

China has put constraints on every county in the world, not just China, Rubenstein said.

"China was the primary destination," she said. "That is true. What is entirely not true is that they were the only market. There are strong domestic markets for all of the materials. So the impact has been that the economics have changed. But not that stuff is getting thrown out."

Rubenstein said the tariffs have not impacted the recycling markets.

"What has happened is the financial relationship with processors," she said. "They are losing money and that is a fact. It used to be that it looked like recycling was free. It was never free. It always costs money. But it used to be that municipalities made enough money from selling these materials, including selling to China."

"At one time we used to market our recyclables," Beck said of the Milton recycling center, "but you need a compactor or a shredder now to do that and we don't have them."