State recycling efforts struggling as costs rise

Ken Dixon
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Connecticut’s once state-of-the-art recycling system is in disarray, the victim of a worldwide collapse in markets for material, compounded by a slow-footed General Assembly and some who are confused about what to throw into their curbside containers, experts say.

Over the last two years, recyclables including glass, cans, cardboard, mixed paper and plastics have gone from moneymakers for towns and cities that collect them in separate containers in the single-stream program, to cost centers that are pushing into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Glass in particular is a problem when it gets crushed in recycling compacter trucks and contaminates clean cardboard, one of the few materials for which a solid resale market still exists.

Recycle in your curbside containers:

Cardboard, newspapers, advertising inserts, magazines, junk mail, catalogues, colored paper, shoe boxes, computer paper, cereal boxes.

All No. 1 and 2 plastic containers under three gallons (no caps), aluminum, steel, tin and food trays, foil and cans. Large plastic items including toys, recycling bins, coolers, baskets, containers and buckets, clean glass food and beverage jars, bottles and jugs, milk and juice cartons, juice boxes, plastic beverage and food containers No. 3-7, up to three liters.

Recycling professionals say that state lawmakers missed a great opportunity this year when they allowed lobbyists in the State Capitol to kill legislation that would have doubled the nickel deposit on cans and bottles of carbonated beverages and expanded the 40-year-old program to include bottles of wine and spirits such as whiskey and vodka.

Now, after China’s refusal to accept the recyclables from the United States and other countries, it costs more to dispose of the once-valuable materials in landfills in Pennsylvania and Ohio than it does to collect and send common household trash to the five regional burn plants that generate modest amounts of electricity.

“I think recycling is important, but why is it cheaper now to just throw recyclables in the main stream of trash?” said Shelton Mayor Mark Lauretti, one-time board member on the state waste authority. “We’re taking losses. There’s no cash market.”

“Things have gotten considerably worse over the last few years,” said Paul DiMauro, Shelton’s director of public works. “I’m very enthusiastic about the single stream, but I don’t think anyone thought of the negatives.” For starters, 12 percent of the more than 1 million tons of recyclables collected each year is unacceptable and gets quickly rerouted to landfills.

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Cardboard that fetched $166 a ton two years ago, gets sold now for $30 a ton. Mixed paper, which had brought in $80 a ton, is down considerably.

**Death of the expanded "bottle bill"**

"The biggest problem is glass, which has a negative value," DiMauro said in a phone interview. Shelton has experienced a $100-per-ton swing. While it used to pay Shelton about $24 a ton for recyclables, it now costs about $70. Trash heading for the electric-generating plant in Bridgeport costs about $64 a ton, DiMauro said. Glass, which makes up about 22 percent of the overall recycle stream, costs more than $90 a ton.

He called the death of legislation this year that would create deposit charges on bottles of wine and distilled spirits a lost opportunity for environmentalists, but a victory for special-interest lobbyists. "It's easy and cheap to reuse clean glass to make new glass," DiMauro said.

Bethel First Selectman Matt Knickerbocker, said that single-stream recycling is generally easy to understand and has clearly boosted the overall recycling rate.

"But I do think the evidence is showing it is on the verge of failure because of the contamination issues, I think most people that I have spoken with in my town are shocked to learn that most glass cannot be recycled. The only glass that really has any commercial value is virgin glass like beverage bottles, containers and that's really the stuff that goes through the (nickel deposit) recycling system and is captured for reprocessing. I think that's the big challenge."

He said three towns in his region have recently embarked on a glass-separation project.

Don Stein, the first selectman of Barkhamsted and chairman of the central and northwest Connecticut-based Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority, says that Connecticut excels at setting goals, such as the effort to divert 60 percent of the state's annual 4 million tons of municipal waste, by the year 2024.

"Where we really have to do some work is on the implementation that with single stream, the problem right now is what you get is generally contaminated waste and it becomes not marketable because of what gets thrown in the bin," Stein recently told a new state panel, appointed by Speaker of the House Joe Aresimowicz, investigating the crisis.

He noted the three-town transfer station for his Litchfield County community has been advised to separate clean cardboard from the rest of residential single-stream recycling. "There's more of a market for cardboard if it's clean and if it's separate than if it's all intermingled. We have the goals, I think the work is how to implement it so the goals will have some meaning."

Stein is a member of the new Blue Ribbon Panel on Recycling, which met earlier this month to frame the problem and brainstorm solutions in time for the short, three-month legislative session that starts Feb. 5. The group has a variety of interests representing, some of which are competing, such as the distilled-spirits industry and the regional glass and can redemption centers.

The problem of large cities

Aresimowicz brought together environmentalists, recyclers, haulers, operators of the five garbage-to-energy plants and community leaders like Stein, Knickerbocker and Branford First Selectman James Cosgrove to the panel, with the hopes that some consensus can emerge.

Ed Spinella, an attorney for haulers, said he believes the single stream system is working, noting that millions of dollars in sorting equipment have been purchased. "And generally speaking I think that Connecticut should be proud that the residue rate from those facilities that market recycling is somewhere between 7 and 12 percent, which is a very low percentage compared to what is happening in other states."

But Spinella stressed that besides Stamford, which has a generally robust recycling rate, Connecticut's large cities are disappointments, where there are more cost-cutting apartment owners, management companies and absentee landlords who don't pay attention to recycling, as well as less-educated residents.

"The big cities struggle tremedously to educate and enforce people about recycling," he said. "Frankly if you drive down some of the streets of some of the major cities, you won't see many recycling containers out on the curbside on the day it's set for collection."

Chris Nelson, supervisor for the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection's sustainable materials management group, said there is a growing importance in getting the public to understand what can and cannot go into recycling bins.

"People are always a little surprised that, ah, I shouldn't be doing that," Nelson said, pointing to recent reports from the Northeast Recycling Council. "Other states and nearby states have invested a lot more money in public campaigns that I believe would help us to reduce the contamination at facilities."

A new report by the recycling council indicates that the value of recyclables continues to plummet.

Overall, Nelson told the panel that Connecticut is slightly ahead of other states overall, but major efforts should go forward in the realm of recycling textiles, and the state's food waste that totals about 500,000 tons annually.

He said the targeted 60 percent diversion rate for waste includes an increase in recycling from 35 percent to 45 percent, and rerouting food waste using new technologies such as anaerobic digestion, and source reduction.

Julie Cammarata, a lobbyist for the state's largest food-digesting company, who serves on the panel, notes that it's the heaviest part of the waste stream. "It can be managed more sustainably, so in a lot of ways it is the low-hanging fruit that will get us to a big chunk of moving that diversion rate," she said. About a dozen towns are doing voluntary food diversion, which is mostly focused on commercial operations.

State Sen. Craig Miner, R-Litchfield, ranking member of the legislative Environment Committee, said in a recent interview that while the bottle-deposit regulation is working, the emerging challenge is to somehow foster new ways to treat and sell for recyclables, particularly within the state.

"The market for certain commodities has gone away, and the market on some other commodities never existed," he said. "The recycling program we have may have worked well when it was initially contemplated, but we may be chasing the wrong things. Perhaps we should be focusing on those commodities that we don't get any money for and try to find a reuse for those as close as possible to Connecticut, so it doesn't cost money to haul it. I would think there is a way to come together around a common goal."

"Sustainability, conservation and good environmental stewardship are all important goals for communities and government," said Stratford Mayor Laura Hoydick, a former member of the state House of Representatives. "Where recycling had been both an environmental and financial benefit, now the cost of recycling has surpassed the cost of disposal fees resulting in additional cost to tax payers. We are receptive to looking at any new ideas that mitigate that cost to cities and towns which is why we implemented curbside textile recycling."

Aresimowicz, D-Berlin, the most-powerful member of the House of Representatives, but a political realist, agrees, but admits it's complicated, and the upcoming legislative session is only three-months-long. "It's a time-sensitive issue, but maybe we can't fix it in a year," he told his panel. "This subject is not easy."

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Ken Dixon
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Ken Dixon is a Connecticut native and Stamford High School graduate. He graduated with a journalism degree from Ohio University, where he also was most valuable player on his soccer team. He covered suburban communities and Bridgeport City Hall before the State Capitol. He won awards from the National Society of Professional Journalists and the National Press Club; several awards from the National Society of Newspaper Columnists; and numerous awards for news and column writing from the state chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. He still play competitive soccer in an intrastate league.

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