

## Crunch Time for Recycling

Written by John Ise, BT Contributor  
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### Like wattage and water, we should pay for our share of trash



When you throw something away, what does “away” mean? This is an important question to ask as you toss your trash twice weekly into your garbage can. We’re a notoriously wasteful bunch.

According to a UK survey, women wear the average piece of clothing about seven times before they discard it. We Americans also produce about 4.4 pounds of garbage daily. We throw out 150,000 tons of food, one pound per person every day. And those Publix plastic bags we use for...say...15 minutes?

How much garbage do you create? How many coffee cups, sandwich wrappers, and other items do you toss daily?

Much of all this ends up in landfills that, however visually sanitized, are toxic. The Mt. Trashmores of the world are responsible for 16 percent of methane emissions, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

“But I recycle!” we squawk. Recycling’s a great virtue and one we should encourage, but it’s a mere drop in the ecological bucket. Much of the work of U.S. recycling facilities has been devoted to packaging and shipping recyclables to China, which performs the actual recycling and then sells the recycled materials to vendors worldwide.

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But China stopped accepting many of our recycled materials months ago, claiming that they weren't properly decontaminated. As reported by the *New York Times* and by *BT* contributor John Dorschner on his Miami Web News website, contaminated materials included certain metals, pizza boxes, and the like intermixed with appropriate recyclables like paper, glass, and aluminum.

As Dorschner points out, it all results in a contracting market for the very narrow universe of domestic recycling companies who pass costs on to municipalities to accept their recyclings. If the costs of recycling programs continue an upward trajectory, the prospect of South Florida municipalities giving up their recycling programs is a distinct possibility. Recycling programs are costly and getting ever more expensive.

Fortunately, there's a firm commitment at the administrative and political levels across all three Villages to maintain recycling programs; the Miami Shores program is estimated to have an 85 percent participation rate.

Recyclables in Miami Shores are delivered to Waste Connections Recycling. Paper products are still sent to China, metals to the northern United States, and plastics are kept local to be ground into pellets. Village staff note that recycling contamination is lower in Miami Shores due to having open recycling bins, as opposed to the county's larger closed bins with covers. Open bins allow public works staff to immediately exclude non-recyclables during pickups.

Yet if citizens are sincere about tamping down on the throwaway mentality and promoting a greener ethos, we need to change the economic reality. Ralph Nader said we need to tax what we burn, not what we earn. Make it economically viable to be green -- and economically punishing to be the polluter.

An interesting albeit longshot development in the Florida Legislature is a proposal to levy a 20-cent deposit on bottles and cans. California and nine other states already do this. If you came here from elsewhere, you may remember collecting empty aluminum cans and bottles, and returning them to the store to make good on the nickel or dime "deposits" that the original purchasers made.

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An extra financial incentive would in theory mean less litter and substantially higher recycling rates, while putting money in the pockets of people willing to do the right thing.

Or so it would seem. Most bottle deposit programs were devised before curbside recycling programs took root and might just segment the recycling market, rather than expand it.

The Natural Resources Defense Council has opted for a more targeted approach with “deposits” on hard-to-recycle products, such as electronic waste, heavy glass, and metals. These products that often end up “contaminating” our recycling stream need to be separated by individual do-gooders and returned/recycled for profit. Create a recycling market for these products, and good things may happen.

Yet focusing on recycling alone misses the broader point. The mantra “reduce, reuse, recycle” has “recycle” last for a reason. If we focused as much of our energies on reducing and reusing consumer products (the technical term, I believe, is “crap”) as on recycling, we’d be significantly better off.

“Your trash is your private property,” wrote John Tierney in a 1996 *New York Times Magazine* article titled “Recycling Is Garbage.” “You should be responsible for getting rid of it. You should have to pay to get rid of it -- and you should pay whatever price it takes to ensure that your garbage doesn’t cause environmental problems for anyone else.”

And to this end, perhaps a national movement promoting “pay as you throw” is worthy of local support. The basic concept is you pay for the equivalent volume of waste your household produces. The more trash you produce, the more you pay for its disposal. The less trash -- well, you get the idea.

It’s the same motivation for turning off lights and the water tap. With our current flat rate of municipal garbage pickup, everyone pays the same, irrespective of the volume of waste, and there’s no economic nudge toward conserving or recycling.

Pay-as-you-throw programs use brightly colored, custom-designed trash bags as the way to

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“meter” trash.

- Residents must dispose of their trash only in the official trash bags, which they purchase at Village Hall or local retail stores.
- The bags usually cost a few dollars (depending on size), which covers the cost of the bag, as well as the collection and disposal of trash.
- Money collected from the sale of the official trash bags is delivered back to the Village, which uses it to provide trash collection.
- The bags are a distinctive color, with the Village seal, so to be easily identified by collection workers. These bags, and only these, are collected by public works.
- Thus we villagers would be economically prodded to throw away less and recycle more because we can see -- and control -- what we're paying for.

Got it?

Neil Seldman, of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, points to the proven success of pay-as-you-throw, writing, “Decatur, Ga., has cut trash by 42 percent with PAYT and doubled its recycling rate. When Worcester, Mass., began its PAYT program in 1993, the recycling rate increased from 2 percent to 38 percent *in the first week.*”

It seems money is a more primal driver of human behavior than morality.

Maybe it will behoove us all to return to the old Scouting outdoor principal of “leave no trace,” but extend that ecological philosophy beyond the campground to our entire planet. And then we

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will profit from that ethos.

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