Recycling Hangs Tough

by Eric A. Goldstein
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One year after Mayor Michael Bloomberg's surprise proposal to eliminate the household recycling of metals, glass and plastics, the city's recycling program refuses to surrender.

In fact, recycling and solid waste experts are now cautiously optimistic regarding the future of this highly visible trash disposal strategy. They point to the ongoing successes of paper recycling, to a new offer that would pay the city for recycling all of the plastics and metals it collects, and to determined legislators on the City Council who have defended and advanced recycling as part of a rational long-term solid waste strategy for New York City.

To be sure, the city still confronts the daunting fiscal challenges that prompted the Bloomberg administration to seek cuts in funding for recycling last spring. The Department of Sanitation remains ambivalent in its support for recycling and waste prevention. And regular changes regarding what materials the city collects for recycling have left many New Yorkers confused about exactly what is and what is not part of the city's recycling program today. (Currently, paper and metal are still part of the program; glass and plastic are not.)

Still, what is remarkable, according to some waste experts and fiscal watchdogs, is that the long-term economic viability of recycling is becoming clearer -- even as the city faces perhaps its most serious budget problems in a generation.

BACKGROUND

While recycling has been around New York City in one form or another for decades, a landmark l989 mandatory recycling law, initiated by the New York City Council, triggered an increased emphasis on this solid waste strategy during the 1990s. When the recycling law was enacted, then City Council chief Peter Vallone called it "one of the most significant pieces of legislation in the history of the city."

The l989 statute required the Department of Sanitation to meet annual recycling tonnage requirements that were designed to boost recycling over the next five years. And in the summer of 1989, the department launched what would soon become the first citywide curbside collection of recyclables in New York history.

From less than one percent in the late l980s, recycling in New York City climbed to roughly 20 percent of the city's total residential waste stream by mid-2002. And the 1989 statute (and follow-up state court orders) required the sanitation department to achieve further incremental increases in citywide recycling collections.

In February 2002, however, the Bloomberg administration proposed to "suspend" the recycling of metals, plastic and glass. With the city facing a serious budget shortfall, sanitation department officials forecast that such recycling cuts would result in annual savings of $51 million, due in large part to the reduced number of waste collection trucks that would be needed, they said, under the proposed cutbacks. But recycling advocates questioned the validity of the city's estimated cost savings. And former Sanitation Commissioner Brendan Sexton warned at the time that "halting recycling now is likely to cause irreparable harm to a program that took many years and hundreds of millions of dollars to build up."

The City Council, which had long recognized the environmental benefits and political popularity of recycling, stepped up to help save the program. Under the leadership of Solid Waste Committee Chairman Michael McMahon, and in response to vigorous advocacy from environmental and civic organizations, the council brokered a final budget agreement that retained recycling of metals, while suspending recycling of plastics for one year and glass for two years.

The June 2002 compromise worked out by Chairman McMahon and his council colleagues was especially important, say recycling advocates, because it kept alive the separate collection of metals, and set a schedule for the reintroduction of plastic and glass recycling. (As was true of the original Bloomberg administration plan, the final budget deal also preserved the city's successful paper recycling program.)

As a result of the budget agreement announced last summer, the sanitation department ended recycling pick-ups of plastics and glass on July 1st of last year, and returned to collecting those materials as part of the department's regular trash pick-ups.

MOMENTUM SHIFTS BACK TO RECYCLING

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Despite last year's cutbacks to the city's recycling program, solid waste experts, public officials and environmental advocates say that recycling is about to experience another one of its 11th hour come-backs. Ironically, the primary reason for their cautious optimism is the increasing cost-effectiveness of recycling when compared to out-of-state waste export to landfills or incinerators.

The Department of Sanitation "justified its decision to suspend glass and plastic recycling on the expectation that the city would save tens of millions of dollars each year," Comptroller William C. Thompson recently wrote. "It is now abundantly clear that merely recycling metal and exporting glass and plastic as waste is more expensive than recycling all of these materials."

According to the Comptroller, with recent new bids for exporting waste from Brooklyn ranging from $75 to $82 per ton and assuming the sanitation department chooses the lowest bidder, the citywide average waste export costs will rise from $66 to $69 per ton. In Queens, the average cost of waste export is $71 a ton. In comparison, the city has recently received a bid to recycle metal, glass and plastics for $70 a ton. Moreover, the export of waste from Queens requires the city's sanitation trucks to haul the waste to New Jersey, whereas the reinstatement of full-scale recycling would allow Queens to recycle metal, glass and plastic at a facility within that borough, reducing the department's transportation costs.

Former New York City sanitation department waste expert Benjamin Miller agrees with such economic analyses. "It is utterly predictable that we'd go back to recycling," he maintains.

"The graph lines for [how much the city pays for waste] export are going straight up and the costs for recycling are coming down," according to Benjamin Miller, author of the book "Fat of the Land," which traces the history of solid waste disposal in New York City over the past 200 years.

The costs for collecting and disposing of city wastes have soared, says Miller, by 60 percent since 1996, when New York began to phase out waste disposal at its Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island. Independent experts predict another 60 percent increase by 2010 in the cost for collection and waste export. This is largely due, Miller believes, to the fact that the city is now totally dependent on a handful of large national waste industry haulers to dispose of its non-recycled trash.

"Expect the costs of waste export to go up, up, up" under the current approach, warns Miller.

At a recent City Council budget hearing, Sanitation Commissioner John Doherty had little choice but to concede that at least the vast bulk of last year's projected savings from cuts to recycling were never actually realized. Under vigorous questioning by City Councilmember David Yassky, Commissioner Doherty acknowledged that most of the projected savings from reduced recycling pick-ups were simply transferred to sanitation department waste collection operations, where hundreds of additional truck shifts were added to handle the increase in plastics and glass (which were now being discarded with regular waste).

As the hearing proceeded, a group of students visited the council chamber to see city government in action. Councilmember Yassky welcomed the students and noted: "I do have to caution them that they should not take their lessons in math from the Department of Sanitation."

RECYCLING IS BECOMING CHEAPER THAN WASTE EXPORT

Meanwhile, the fiscal outlook is improving for that portion of the waste stream that is or could be recycled.

Newspapers, magazines, cardboard, junk mail, and other paper products make up the single largest portion of the city's residential waste stream. And for this commodity, the economic benefits of recycling are readily apparent.

New York City is paid for every ton of paper it delivers to recyclers. For example, the Visy Paper Recycling Plant on Staten Island takes about a third of the city's recycled paper waste from the Department of Sanitation. The Visy plant de-inks these paper products and turns them into paper used to make corrogated boxes and other products. On average, the city is paid $7 a ton for paper sent to Visy and other paper recyclers. In contrast to paying $66 or more per ton for trash export, New York City benefits economically from every ton of paper it recycles.

Unfortunately, as a result of public confusion following the suspension of plastic and glass recycling last summer, paper recycling rates in New York have declined by about 12 percent.

This problem, experts agree, is reversible with stepped up efforts to educate the public on the specifics of the city's recycling program and the fiscal advantages of paper recycling.

Metals have historically been among the most profitable materials to recycle, both here in New York and elsewhere. As with other recyclables, the markets for metals often fluctuate. Since last summer, New York City has been receiving as much as $30 a ton for the metals it collects for recycling.

The market for plastics has historically been more problematic. But this winter, New York received surprisingly good news when a family-owned New Jersey recycling company bid on a combined contract to recycle the city's metals and plastics.

The New Jersey company, Hugo Neu Schnitzer East, submitted a bid that proposed to pay the sanitation department $5.10 a ton for metals and plastics. (This bid stands in contrast with those from primarily large waste management haulers, whose bids require the city to pay $66 a ton or more for the bidder to take New York's metals and plastics for recycling.)

The Department of Sanitation has not yet officially accepted the New Jersey company bid to handle city metals and plastics recyclables. But given the financial benefits to the city of accepting this offer, solid waste experts believe the contract will be awarded shortly -- with citywide collection of plastics to resume this summer.

CHALLENGES REMAIN

There is no longer much doubt that recycling makes environmental sense, that it preserves natural resources, and that it could provide additional opportunities for local jobs, when compared to garbage export. But recycling advocates say that the city must still reform and enhance its system for collecting recyclables. And pressures to find cheaper ways of disposing of the 11,000 or so tons a day of trash that the sanitation department is responsible for will continue to dominate solid waste discussions for the foreseeable future.

"Despite the positive economic news on recycling of paper, metals and plastics, for New York

City's recycling program to be fully successful will require both a stronger city commitment to make recycling work and implemention of new approaches to make the program even more cost-effective," says Mark Izeman, an attorney and waste specialist at the Natural Resources Defense Council (where I work).

With such concerns in mind, the Mayor's Office and the City Council have jointly released a task force report on the city's recycling program. Although the report is only six pages long, it offers several recommendations that could help foster the continuing growth of cost-effective recycling. For example, it recommends restoration of plastics recycling on July 1st (based upon the favorable bid from the New Jersey recycling firm). It calls for an analysis of "single-stream" collection (in which all recyclables are placed in one receptacle) and for consideration of "pay-as-you-throw" systems (a revenue neutral trash collection approach designed to encourage maximum recycling). And it calls upon the State Legislature to expand the "bottle bill" (so that the five cent deposits would cover non-carbonated beverages) and to return unredeemed beverage deposits to the municipality in which the original purchase occurred (to provide a big, new revenue stream for the city's recycling program).

These and other reform proposals will also be the subject of a comprehensive recycling report, scheduled for release by a coalition of the city's leading environmental and waste organizations in early May.

These are challenging times for the New York City Department of Sanitation, which under the city's new budget proposal is facing lay-offs of hundreds of employees. Fortunately, recycling, which has long been championed because of its wide-ranging environmental benefits, may soon prove to also be one of the most cost-effective weapons in the city's waste disposal arsenal.

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