



Getting (Close) to Zero

By Dean Amel

The Mount Vernon Group has been active in recent months in two efforts to transform the everyday lives of Northern Virginians in ways that will make our communities more environmentally friendly, sustainable and pleasant places to live.

Zero Waste

The first effort was our support of a decision by Arlington to move toward “zero waste” by 2038. This is part of a national effort by localities to reduce the amount of waste they produce and increase recycling to the point where the amount of waste going to an incinerator or landfill is zero, or close to it. In most cases, “zero waste” is defined as reusing or recycling at least 90% of a location’s waste. That last 10% may cause a problem for language purists, but it recognizes that no system of waste reduction can ever be perfect. Most jurisdictions in northern Virginia are recycling about half of their waste, but getting to 90% will be less difficult than you might imagine. Arlington has identified three steps that will get it to 80% recycling.

1. Removing yard waste from the trash and sending it to a composting facility. Arlington already has spring and fall yard waste collection and, beginning this month (March), residents will receive a green rolling cart to collect yard waste year-round. The biggest immediate effect of this change will be to collect grass clippings in the summer. Grass burns poorly in an incinerator because of its water content but works very well in a composting facility.
2. Adding a food waste recycling program in the near future. The rolling carts for yard waste will be able to accommodate food waste in the near future, when a commercial food waste recycling facility is expected to open in Prince Georges County, Maryland. People will be able to put sealed paper bags containing food scraps in the green bins and the food scraps will be separated after collection.
3. Educating people on what else can be recycled. Periodic surveys of the contents of trash trucks at local incinerators find that a large percentage – often around one-sixth – of the waste could have been recycled. (Does conducting that kind of survey sound like your dream job? I didn’t think so.) If residents can be convinced to recycle the used pizza boxes, junk mail and plastic containers that they now toss in the trash, it would save jurisdictions money and help the environment.

Why do we care? Almost all trash in northern Virginia goes to an incinerator. While these incinerators produce energy when they burn trash, even state-of-the-art facilities that meet all EPA regulations for emissions send toxic chemicals into the air. Burning plastic is particularly polluting, which is why it’s important to get those plastic bags full of grass clippings out of the waste stream. Also, recycling is cheaper than trash collection. While the cost of recycling varies with the market prices of the collected

material, in recent years it has always been cheaper per ton to bring materials to a recycling facility than to dump them at an incinerator.

Of course it's better to follow the waste hierarchy and, where possible, reduce the amount of waste produced first, before reusing and recycling what is left. Everyone should be encouraged to leave grass clippings on their lawns and to compost in their backyards, where that is possible.

Zero Use of Fossil Fuels

If the idea of getting to the point of zero waste seems difficult, the idea of getting to the point where our communities use no fossil fuels for transportation or for heating, cooling or lighting buildings is even more daunting. While many of us have been amazed—and delighted – at the speed with which we have moved away from the use of coal for power generation, the idea that we could replace natural gas for heating, cooling and electricity while also ending the use of gas and diesel for powering vehicles strikes many – including many dedicated environmentalists – as farfetched.

However, on closer inspection, a commitment to 100% clean energy is both feasible and desirable. Fifteen U.S. communities – including San Diego, California; Georgetown, Texas; and Columbia, South Carolina – have committed to this goal by 2050.

Arlington already has a Clean Energy Plan that aims to cut its greenhouse gases by 75% by 2050, and the plan's implementation is on schedule. Alexandria's Environmental Action Plan has a similar goal and is scheduled to be updated this year.

The dramatic decline in the cost of solar and wind power has made them as cheap as fossil fuels in many cases and continued technological developments should result in a clear cost advantage in the future.

Of course, Arlington, Alexandria and other local jurisdictions won't be able to get to 100% clean energy on their own. Both technological developments – including improved storage efficiency for intermittent energy sources like solar and wind – and political developments – including greater federal and state support for clean energy or a reduction in the current subsidies given to fossil fuels – will be needed to reach our goal. But the Sierra Club will be working with Alexandria and Arlington over the next year to convince them to become the first places in Virginia join the growing list of localities declaring themselves "Ready for 100" percent clean energy.

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