



## A Reasoned Response to Recycling in the News

by Dean Amel

There has been a lot of negative news lately in the popular press about recycling markets. China, the most popular destination for America's recyclables, has reduced its purchase of our discards and tightened its limits on the amount of contamination that will be accepted in recyclable materials. As a consequence, the resale price of recyclables has dropped. For example, not too long ago the average price that Arlington received for its recycled materials was greater than zero, but the average price has now turned negative, so that Arlington is paying the company that processes its recyclables for every ton the county delivers.

Some have argued that this is a reason to cut back on recycling programs, but this is not a good idea. Recycling still saves money, because the cost of delivering trash to a landfill or to the waste-to-energy incinerator that Arlington and Alexandria share is still much higher than the cost of delivering material to a recycler. As a result, places like Alexandria and Arlington save money for every pound of material diverted from the trash to recycling.

A second reason to maintain recycling programs is the volatility of markets for recyclables. This isn't the first time the prices for recycled materials have dropped. When this has happened in the past, new users of such materials have emerged, increasing the demand for the materials and pushing prices back up. If China continues to spurn our recyclables, other markets – either domestic or foreign – are likely to arise to make use of these resources.

There is other good news in the area of solid waste. Yard waste collection is growing, diverting material from landfills and incinerators and turning it into useful compost or mulch. In the next year or two, Arlington plans to expand its yard waste collection to include food scraps, which will also be composted. Food waste is one of the largest segments of the non-recycled waste stream that can be diverted to a useful purpose. And food waste tends to be heavy, so diverting the scraps from going to the local incinerator will save considerable public funds.

Another positive development has been a growing movement to reduce the amount of trash generated – especially plastic trash. Reducing the creation of trash is better for the environment than recycling trash after it's used. As detailed in another article in this newsletter, a number of local groups, including the Sierra Club – Mount Vernon Group, have started a group called PlasticFreeDMV that has instituted a Plastic Free Challenge to help people address the trash problem by reducing the amount of plastics used and trash produced.

Anyone interested in issues related to solid waste and recycling is encouraged to contact Dean Amel at [damel@alum.mit.edu](mailto:damel@alum.mit.edu) to find out ways to get more involved.

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