

NJ municipalities are cracking down on recycling rules to keep up with a changing market

[David M. Zimmer and Matt Fagan](#), NorthJersey.com Published 6:00 a.m. ET Jan. 25, 2020

Did we get tired or just get lazy? Either way, North Jersey residents are increasingly finding that more is expected of them when selecting what to place in their recycling cans.

Put the wrong thing in, and recycling haulers are likely to tag your can and make you try again. Officials say the crackdown is a necessity. Once a green source of profit, curbside recycling in many towns has become another built-in cost for taxpayers to pick up due to a host of market changes.

"We were disposing of our recyclables at zero cost – co-mingled (bottles, cans and plastics)," said Robert Casey, West Milford Township budget consultant. "It now costs us \$40 a ton."

The town once earned more than \$50,000 from recyclables produced by its 26,000 residents. In 2020, it will spend more than \$100,000 to have them removed.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Marie Kruzan, executive director of the Association of New Jersey Recyclers, said a modest profit can still be made if the material being recycled is clean. This is not a case of recyclers being petulant, but rather the free market at work

Nationally, recycling firms are coping with a marketplace that's much more fickle since China effectively shut its doors to imported recyclables in January 2018.

The problem is that too much trash or unwanted or dirty items were (and are) getting mixed into the recycling stream, Kruzan said. The bottles, cans, plastics and paper collected from residents consequently lost so much value that, in some cases, they became effectively worthless.

"You can't bake a cake and throw mud in it," Kruzan said. "No one will eat it."

Getting a clean product however is not easy. Ron Lottermann, Fair Lawn's recycling coordinator, said his town has been pushing residents to produce cleaner recyclables for two years and are making in-roads. The town launched a recycling education program in early 2018 with traditional means, flyers, emails and social media. Then, last summer, Fair Lawn officials hired people to check what its residents are throwing in their recycling barrels.

People were flagged for putting contaminated items and banned plastics into recycling bins. The biggest culprit by far is the clamshell, the clear plastic containers delis put sandwiches in and supermarkets fill with berries, he said. "At the beginning of summer we were flagging 90 percent," Lotterman said. "At the end we were down to 30 percent."

Lotterman said he did some spot checks recently and found about three in 10 homes still fail to properly clean or sort recyclables. He hopes that with further education he can get that down to one in 10. As it is, Fair Lawn's recycling costs residents more than it earns back.

While U.S. recycling companies always had stringent guidelines for recycling, China's leniency and appetite for recyclables kept the market prices high prior to 2018. The profitably permitted companies like Passaic's Atlantic Coast Fibers to sort out items that were not recyclable, have them carted off to a landfill and still provide towns with revenue.

The profitably also popularized single-stream recycling, which advocates claim can reduce solid waste by 30 percent by diverting more to recyclers. Moreover, it tended to make everyone lax about what they put in the recycling can. "China accepted all our sins," Atlantic Coast Fiber's Rick Ramsay said. That changed in January 2018 when Chinese officials announced the nation would no longer buy recovered plastics or mixed paper with contamination from glass, metal or common waste.

Other nations stepped in, only to bail out. Indonesia announced in 2019 that it would only accept mixed paper with minimal contamination. Then, India tightened regulations on imports of mixed paper. The nation had become the top destination for the U.S.'s refuse paper after China banned mixed paper entirely.

With commodity prices at historic lows, companies like Atlantic Coast Fiber and Waste Management have increasingly charged municipalities for all the materials that can't readily be recycled. Under its new contract with Atlantic Coast Fiber, West Milford taxpayers are paying per ton processing fees of about \$70 for paper but only recouping about \$50 from its sale, Casey said. The margin rises to about \$45 for co-mingled glass, metal and plastic, he said. To curtail the costs of recycling operation, town officials recently decided to significantly cut the hours of its recycling center - saying residents can and should have their items picked up on the curb. The center will now be open just three days each week to accept items such as tires, oil and electronics. The move is expected to save about \$65,000 this year, officials said.

Some municipalities, including Clifton, have been able to remain profitable by requiring residents to meticulously separate and clean recyclables. The "City That Cares" manages to net about \$83,000 for its glass by requiring residents to separate by color - green, brown and clear, said Nick Villano, city manager. Paper, cans and plastic only turn a marginal profit, however. Where the city once netted roughly \$300,000 a year from recycling, it now makes less than \$100,000. "We are told that we keep contamination at a minimum," Villano said. "Most people wash out their jars."

Clean bottles, metal cans, plastic containers with a 1, 2 or 5 in the triangle on the bottom, as well as newsprint, papers and cardboard are the only reliably recyclable items, area recyclers say.

Polystyrene, "wax-coated" paper and greasy pizza boxes are all recycling no-nos.

"Think about it. You don't want to pour grease down the drain," Kruzan said. "The old adage is when in doubt throw it out."

To cut costs, Oakland and a number of municipalities and counties, have switched from a single stream method of recycling back to dual stream, which calls for paper and cardboard to be kept separate from plastic, glass and cans. Single stream allowed residents to mix the items in one container. Dual stream system helps keep the recyclables cleaner.

Plastic and bags

Another common problem is the plastic bag. Both the trash bags used to corral recyclables and single-use shopping bags obtained at supermarkets cause havoc at processing plants.

Processing crews must rip the trash bags open to release the recyclables within for sorting and set them aside. The single-use bags either end up in the solid waste pile or wrapped around the rollers where the items are sorted. All sorting stops while the bags are removed.

The single-use bags can be returned to some supermarkets for recycling but are increasingly being banned throughout New Jersey.

Glen Rock, Garfield, Montclair, Paramus and roughly three dozen other towns and counties have already implemented bag bans. Woodland Park's ban starts April 1, said Mayor Keith Kazmark. Neighboring Clifton is considering joining the surge by requiring shoppers in its retail stores to bring their own tote bags or pay for paper bags.

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