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# Houston Resists Recycling, and Independent Streak Is Cited

By ADAM B. ELLICK

Correction Appended

HOUSTON — While most large American cities have started ambitious recycling programs that have sharply reduced the amount of trash bound for landfills, Houston has not.

The city's shimmering skyline may wear the label of the world's energy capital, but deep in Houston's Dumpsters lies a less glamorous superlative: It is the worst recycler among the United States' 30 largest cities.

Houston recycles just 2.6 percent of its total waste, according to a study this year by Waste News, a trade magazine. By comparison, San Francisco and New York recycle 69 percent and 34 percent of their waste respectively. Moreover, 25,000 Houston residents have been waiting as long as 10 years to get recycling bins from the city.

Environmental advocates are pleading for municipal intervention. And some small improvements — an organic waste program, for one — are expected soon.

But city officials say real progress will be hard to come by. Landfill costs here are cheap. The city's sprawling, no-zoning layout makes collection expensive, and there is little public support for the kind of effort it takes to sort glass, paper and plastics. And there appears to be even less for placing fees on excess trash.

“We have an independent streak that rebels against mandates or anything that seems trendy or hyped up,” said Mayor Bill White, who favors expanding the city's recycling efforts. “Houstonians are skeptical of anything that appears to be oversold or exaggerated. But Houstonians can change, and change fast.”

High fuel costs do not help either.

“I’m not going to send my truck 50 miles to pick up one can,” said Chris Hickman, a recycling manager at Waste Management, the nation’s largest waste company, whose headquarters is here.

Even largely blue-collar Milwaukee and the rival Texas metropolis of Dallas, both with larger recycling budgets and smaller populations, have significantly higher recycling rates than Houston.

“I’m a Texan, and it pains me that we still have the Old Western mentality,” said Tex Corley, the chief executive of Strategic Materials, the nation’s largest glass recycler, which is based in Houston.

The city picks up garbage at some 340,000 households, and fewer than half have recycling bins. About 25,000 households are on the waiting list for the bins, but the city says it cannot afford more bins.

Those without the special bins must cart their recyclable garbage to one of just nine full-service drop-off depots in the city.

But when Monica Pope, a locally renowned chef, approached a city-run recycling depot in her silver pick-up truck full of containers, she was turned away.

“They said my truck was too full,” Ms. Pope recalled, laughing. “There are cultures that just don’t get it, and, unfortunately, Houston is one of them.”

Now, Ms. Pope recycles at what she says is a safer, cleaner and more convenient drop-off center operated by an autonomous city within Houston, saving \$6,000 a year in trash fees.

Private businesses, like office towers, apartment complexes, and restaurants, are responsible for their own garbage, although advocates of recycling are pleading with the city to regulate them. Commercial recyclers say that despite a recent increase in public interest, their services remain a tough sell.

Mayor White, a Democrat who has consistently crusaded for environmental initiatives, said that a lack of progress on recycling was among his biggest disappointments and that the situation merited “radical changes,” like the organic yard waste program that he says will increase the city’s recycling rate to 20 percent by 2010. The national average is 32 percent.

Mayor White, who served as deputy secretary of energy under President [Bill Clinton](#), stopped short, however, of calling for mandated recycling or charging citizens for excess garbage.

Highlighting the sensitivity to such taxes, last year the City Council considered imposing a mandatory \$3.50 monthly environment fee for every single-family home. It was negotiated to a voluntary \$2.25 charge and eventually dropped entirely because of fierce opposition, city officials said.

Some critics blame the state for not doing more to prod municipalities into recycling. Texas does not

require deposits on bottles, and the state does not regulate landfill waste. Still, that has not hampered other cities like San Antonio and Austin from operating what are widely considered successful recycling programs. The subject has provoked heated exchanges. Recently, Leo Gold, a liberal radio talk show host, presented a petition to Mr. White with nearly 1,100 signatures urging him to “do the right thing.”

“We are still sending a message that we want a lot of trash, and we want a little bit of recycling,” Mr. Gold told the mayor at a City Council meeting.

That said, Mr. Gold, also a financial analyst, praised Houston for being honest in its data.

The director of the city’s solid waste department, Harry Hayes, acknowledged there was room for improvement, but noted that the voluntary system was “not a government issue.”

“It’s a matter of if our folks are motivated to do this,” Mr. Hayes said.

Comparisons to other cities are unfair, Mr. Hayes said, considering Houston’s cheap landfill fees and the diversion of city money to relief efforts after two recent [hurricanes](#).

Compounding the city’s difficulties is a contract it signed in the 1990s that requires 30 percent of residential waste to go to landfills until 2027. Most cities have contracts with far shorter terms.

In the meantime, Houston is trying to do better.

In October, it will start recycling heavy organic yard waste, like trees and grass clippings. The program is expected to salvage 90,000 tons annually, enough to fill Houston’s tallest structure, the Chase Tower.

“It will make a tremendous difference,” said a city spokeswoman, Marina Joseph, noting Houston’s year-round growing season.

The recycled matter will be sold at a profit to companies like Wal-Mart and Lowe’s. But even that initiative has its critics.

“Picking up yard clippings isn’t radical,” Mr. Corley said. “It’s not even innovative. They just aren’t going far enough. Recycling ought to be mandatory. Send the waste police.”

And to make better use of the recycling containers it does have, the city next year will take them away from households that are not filling them and give them to ones on the waiting list. “Driving up and down the street to pick up nothing isn’t good,” said Sarah Mason, an environmental analyst for the mayor.

But city officials say the biggest barrier to recycling in Houston is cheap landfill fees. It only costs \$32

to dispose of a ton of waste here, compared with \$70 in the Northeast, according to the National Solid Wastes Management Association's latest survey, in 2005.

Some reject that argument, however, citing other cities with even lower landfill fees.

"Blaming landfills is a completely flawed argument, old-fashioned thinking that is really just laziness," said Eric Lombardi, the director of Ecocycle, the nation's largest nonprofit recycler, in Boulder, Colo.

Mr. Lombardi's operation claims a 60 percent recycling rate, despite landfill fees of \$15 a ton — less than half of Houston's costs. With commodity prices at a record high, he said, if recycling can be profitable "in my landlocked state without easy access to buyers like China, then it can be profitable anywhere."

Mr. Lombardi said he envied places like Houston that had garbage to sell and ports nearby.

"Every house has to have a bin and a small trash can," he said. "Come on, guys, it's the 21st century. Political leadership is needed to say we're going to change."

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 31, 2008

A picture caption on Tuesday with an article about resistance to recycling in Houston misidentified, in some editions, the location of a recycling center used by T'afia, a restaurant that was shown. As the article noted, the recycling center is in West University Place, an autonomous city surrounded by Houston; it is not in Houston itself.

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