

# South Jersey waste managers learning to adjust to changing recycling parameters, increasing costs

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Recycling in South Jersey, as in much of the world, is adjusting to a new, costlier normal: China no longer wants our trash.

For almost three decades, that country imported immense quantities of paper and plastic waste, and the quality did not much matter. Then in 2018, an industrialized China, newly concerned about pollution, banned the import of 24 types of solid waste. As of Jan. 1, the ban on solid waste imports will be total.

“It has caused the price paid for recyclables to go down, and limited what can be recycled,” said Richard S. Dovey, president of the Atlantic County Utilities Authority.

For instance, as of Nov. 30, the ACUA stopped accepting “bulky rigid plastics,” such as chairs and toys. “The reason being, there’s no market for those items,” said Dovey. “They would just end up in the trash.”

County residents could previously drop off those items at the Delilah Road collection site in Egg Harbor Township.

The ACUA also is increasing, by 3%, its price to accept trash from municipalities. This “tipping fee” hike, which amounts to \$1.90 per ton, was expected to be voted on by the authority’s governing board late this month, said Dovey.

The increase comes in response to a new cost: the \$3.5 million per year the ACUA will be paying to have its recyclables hauled away rather than processed at the authority’s own recycling center. The arrangement, a two-year deal, is with Mazza Recycling Services, of Tinton Falls, Monmouth County.

For some years, county recyclables have been processed locally by Republic Services, a giant waste management corporation based in Phoenix, Arizona. But the Republic Services contract expires at year’s end, and bids for a new contract were almost twice as high, Dovey said.

“Early in our contract with Republic, we made a million dollars a year,” recalled Dovey. “Now that the contract is up, we’re going to have to pay \$3.5 million annually.”

Ocean County is experiencing a similar reversal. The county was making \$1 million annually from recycling two years ago, but in 2020 is

anticipating losses of \$750,000, according to Freeholder Gary Quinn, liaison to the county's solid waste office.

In the hopes of returning to something closer to profitability next year, the county has invested \$5 million in recycling technology, including \$1.96 million on optical sorters to improve the efficiency of paper processing, said Quinn. The result, he claims, is recycled paper the state Department of Environmental Protection considers "the cleanest of any recycling plant in New Jersey."

And perhaps by the middle of 2021, assuming a world with less social distancing requirements, the county will have resumed a full-speed education program, he said, adding, "Education is the most important part of recycling."

John R. Conturo, the Cape May County Municipal Utilities Authority's solid waste program manager, said in a written statement, "Reducing contamination is the most important step in our ability to meet the demands of the recycling market."

The CCMUA's "Know It Before You Throw It" campaign asks residents to keep recyclables loose, clean and dry, without caps and covers on bottles and other containers — and no plastic bags. Like other agencies, the authority no longer takes bulky rigid plastics. Nor does it accept shredded paper, "which had little to no market value and caused contamination in other materials," according to the statement.

In Cumberland County, waste managers will be trying to process recyclables locally, rather than sending them off somewhere else. By June 2021, the county expects to have Commodities Evaluation Solutions, of Trenton, Mercer County, build and operate a "mini-MiRF" (Materials Recovery Facility). This "scaled-down version of a recycling center" will likely halve the county's recycling costs, which amounted to \$800,000 in processing fees in 2019, according to Anthony Riviera, director of solid waste complex, Cumberland County Improvement District.

"We'll be one of the first on the East Coast to have a mini-MiRF," said Riviera, noting the county operated a full-sized recycling center between 1998 and 2008.

In the face of new challengers, waste and recycling experts are embracing the the "mini" concept, he said.

"Everybody was big, big, big, everybody wanted to go big," Riviera said. "Now everybody is looking to scale back, and take a look at how we do recycling, because obviously, over the years, big hasn't really worked. We went from getting paid for our material to now paying for our material."

Local recycling means the county will be able to see exactly what Cumberland residents are recycling, and be able to better target educational efforts, Riviera said. All too often, according to waste management experts, people practice “aspirational recycling,” trying to recycle items best sent to a landfill. Cumberland, Atlantic, and many other jurisdictions, for instance, accept only recyclable plastics designed No. 1 and No. 2, typically bottles in which necks are smaller than the base. By contrast, a plastic, single-serving container of yogurt is likely to be a No. 5, less easily recycled.

Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club, sees a problem in consumer education.

“When we get to the average household in New Jersey, recycling has gone down,” Tittel said.

“Back in the early 1990s, New Jersey did a much better job of recycling. There was a lot more money from the state for education, there was more enforcement, and since that time we’ve kind of backslid.”

The money counties and towns receive from the state Department of Environmental Protection to encourage recycling has not kept pace with costs, he explained.

At the state level, recycling in New Jersey got a boost this year from a new law banning single-use plastic bags and paper bags. Plastic bags are not recyclable, and are notorious for jamming separating machines.

Advocates see more good news in a state Senate bill that mandates certain products contain a minimum of recyclable materials. Sponsored by Bob Smith, D-Middlesex and Somerset, chair of the Environment and Energy Committee, the bill was passed by that committee earlier this month.

“S2515 represents the most significant legislative blueprint for market development in the history of recycling in New Jersey since our Mandatory Recycling Act passed some 33 years ago,” said Gary Sondermeyer, vice president of operations for the Association of New Jersey Recyclers, in a statement submitted to the Environment and Energy Committee on Dec. 10. The bill is “exactly what’s needed to address international market disruptions for commodities,” he added.

The legislation is opposed by some industry groups, including the New Jersey Business and Industry Association.

“It’s seeking to regulate national and international supply chains from New Jersey, which becomes very complicated and unlikely to succeed,” said Ray Cantor, vice president for government affairs. “A national standard that recognizes market realities is a much better approach.”

The environmentalist Tittel, however, sees the bill becoming law early in 2021, and making a contribution to Garden State recycling efforts.

“There’s no magic wand, but there’s a series of steps: Educating the public on how important recycling is, banning plastic bags, now requiring plastics to have a certain amount of recycled content, and maybe a bottle bill comes next. It’s step by step. It’s not going to happen overnight, but you have to keep working at it.”

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