

Metro cities looking for ways to recharge recycling

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Depending on where you live, the future of curbside recycling could include couches, computers, yogurt containers and chicken bones.

Prompted in part by state and county efforts to dramatically reduce the amount of waste going into landfills, communities such as St. Paul, Roseville, Lauderdale and Falcon Heights are debating what residents are willing to recycle and how much they're willing to pay to get items picked up door-to-door or neighborhood-to-neighborhood.

Recycling advocates would like to see the list of items collected at the curbside expanded to include compost, electronics, more types of plastic and "bulkies" such as couches and large appliances. Trends show, however, that participation in curbside recycling has leveled off in many communities and is in some cases on the decline.

"We have very strong municipal recycling programs for residents that have either tapered or kind of peaked," said Zach Hansen, Ramsey County environmental health director. The county recently created a grant program to help cities evaluate "how to ramp it up," he said.

In addition to demographic changes, such as an increase in renters and recent immigrants, some of the participation decline is related to the economy, said Deborah Jones, recycling coordinator for Falcon Heights.

"People are changing their buying habits, and they have less to recycle, because there's not so much paper coming into their homes and there's not so much packaging," Jones said.

St. Paul,

has embarked on "Recycle It Forward," the first citywide recycling assessment in at least a decade. Recycling surveys went out about three weeks ago. Through partnerships with nonprofits such as Neighborhood House, focus groups are planned this month with "nonparticipating communities" and infrequent recyclers such as students, renters and Latinos, as well as newer immigrant groups such as the Hmong, Karen and Somali.

City officials say it's clear that groups that did not grow up with blue bin, curbside recycling are recycling less -- and those populations of the city are growing.

Anne Hunt, the mayor's sustainability and environmental policy coordinator, said overall participation in curbside recycling has leveled off or is on the decline, especially in parts of the city with large numbers of recent immigrants, renters and lower-income residents, such as the East Side. Meanwhile, there are plenty of gung-ho recyclers on the west end of town. A subscription compost service has gained followers in the Mac-Groveland neighborhood, with residents dropping off their compost in the Patagonia parking lot on Grand Avenue.

"There are a number of people, primarily on the west end of St. Paul, who really wanted curbside composting," said Hunt, who is eager to see the city improve its outreach and explore a list of options. "(But) why would we charge all these residents on the East Side of St. Paul for a program they may not use?"

ORGANICS UP NEXT

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has set a goal of reducing the amount of trash headed to landfills by 75 percent by 2030, and cities and counties are under pressure to comply.

"They would like to see organics (recycling) offered by 2016, but it doesn't have to be a curbside drop-off," Hunt said. In addition to Mac-Groveland's neighborhood drop-off, other ideas include block programs, backyard composting and programs based in apartment buildings.

Last summer, St. Paul's residential recycling hauler, Eureka Recycling, embarked on a public campaign to get door-to-door compost collection added to the mayor's proposed city budget. Instead of adopting the Eureka proposal, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman and several members of the St. Paul City Council, including President Kathy Lantry, urged a go-slow approach.

City Hall officials have smiled on the idea of citywide organic waste collection in the past, but they were leery of extending the nonprofit's recycling contract with the city by eight years, from 2016 to 2024, without thoroughly vetting the plan or putting citywide compost collection out to public bid. The Eureka plan would have added an estimated \$23 per year to existing recycling fees.

The effort is not dead, but costs and details will change.

"That proposal will come back forward again, and an eight-year contract extension is no longer necessary," said Dianna Kennedy, a spokeswoman for Eureka Recycling. "We've been able to

get it down to a two-year extension, and the plan will be informed by whatever comes out of this community process."

Organics collection is "really where the next big move is, and cities are looking at how to provide that service in a cost-effective way," said Hansen, the county environmental director.

Under last year's Eureka proposal, the group would have collected a variety of organics and food containers -- including meats, egg cartons and other products that most homeowners would probably not add to backyard compost bins. In St. Paul, Eureka currently collects No. 1 and No. 2 plastics -- such as plastic bottles of soda, milk and laundry detergent -- at curbsides weekly; the nonprofit hopes to expand the list to yogurt containers and plastic salad containers.

SORTING STRATEGY

As part of Recycle It Forward, strategic outreach is planned to others in the recycling industry, including garbage haulers and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

Minneapolis recently adopted single-sort recycling, where residents can drop all their recyclables into one bin. The approach, by most accounts, seems to be working. It has boosted participation, which, as in St. Paul, had leveled off.

"Minneapolis has had a very good response," Hunt said.

Part of the reason that St. Paul still has a "dual sort" system is that recyclers get a higher resale value for cleaner and less contaminated materials, and that keeps costs to taxpayers down. But technology is changing, Hunt notes, and prices are improving for some materials. Sorting has gotten easier, and the impetus behind "dual sort" soon may be moot.

Falcon Heights and Lauderdale have jointly applied to Ramsey County for a grant to help them recycle "bulkies," or big bulky items such as couches and refrigerators. Through a similar county grant, Roseville had been poised to begin curbside appliance collection in April, but the Roseville City Council decided at its last public meeting that those efforts were best left to the private sector, said recycling coordinator Tim Pratt.

"A number of cities are looking at why recycling is flat or tapering off and what materials may be problematic to dispose of properly," Hunt said.

Highland Park will host its own neighborhood meeting on recycling at the Hillcrest Library on March 21, one of a series of "Global Cafes," where visitors walk from table to table to discuss recycling plastics and bulkies and garbage-hauling issues.