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Time to pull recycling program out of the trash

By Preston Niblack

No fooling: On April 1, New York City's recycling rules will change yet again. Over the past year and a half, many New Yorkers have been hard pressed to remember just what materials the city is recycling—and when it gets picked up. At first, it was weekly collection of metal, paper, glass, and plastic. Then it was just metal and paper. Starting last October, plastic was back on the recycling list, but only with alternate week pick ups. Now, glass will again be recycled and weekly crabbiest collection will resume.

Keeping up with this litany of changes has been confusing. But now the city is restarting its full recycling program. Besides often-cited environmental benefits, there is another good reason for city residents to get back in the full recycling habit: The more we recycle the more we can lower the cost of recycling.

Many New Yorkers don't realize that recycling is currently more expensive than regular trash collection. But that extra cost has diminished significantly as the city increased the amount of material it recycled. In 1994, it cost \$275 per ton more to recycle than if that same stuff had been handled as regular refuse.

By 2002, the last year of the full recycling program, that extra cost for recycling had plummeted to \$46 per ton, according to an Independent Budget Office analysis. That's about \$34 million altogether—less than 3 percent of the total cost of handling the city's waste in 2002.

Recycling costs more than refuse collection because it is more expensive to collect it than regular trash. The reason for this is simple: Recycling constitutes only about 20 percent of the total waste stream handled by the Sanitation Department each day.

For each collection shift a truck is less full with recyclables than it is with refuse. A shift to collect recycling costs the same as one to pick up trash—the salaries for two sanitation workers on a truck plus gas—so, on a per ton basis, the cost to collect recycling is higher. Fill the trucks with recyclable and the city get more for its money.

As the city resumes its full recycling program, there are other changes that will help narrow the cost difference. For one thing, the cost of exporting the city's garbage to landfills and incinerators outside the five boroughs continues to grow, rising from \$69 per ton this year to at least \$71 per ton next year.

For another thing, the average cost per ton of handling recyclable will fall as new contracts now being negotiated with the commercial recyclers lower the amount we pay them to take our metal, glass and plastic. This reduction will narrow—but not entirely eliminate—the gap between recycling and refuse.

The city is also negotiating new, long-term recycling contracts that it hopes will lower the cost further.

There may be other measures that our city could take to make recycling less expensive: routing the trucks more efficiently, adopting single-stream collection, developing potential new markets for recyclable and adding other materials—including possibly food waste—to the recycling program. Other cities have taken these steps. Why not consider them for New York?

New Yorkers can help lower costs, too, by increasing the “capture rate”—the share of potentially recyclable material that gets recycled. The Sanitation Department estimates that in 2003 more than half of the recyclable was tossed out with the regular trash.

But now New Yorkers get a chance to start fresh. If tenants and homeowners use the resumption of the full recycling program as motivation to improve their recycling habits the extra municipal cost of recycling can drop further. That could be a boon to the city’s environment and its budget.

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Good decisionmaking about our priorities must include knowing the real costs of our choices. Many New Yorkers are probably willing to pay something extra in order to contribute to preserving the natural environment—in this case, a cost that amounts to about \$11 per year per household. While we continue to work toward lowering the cost of recycling, we should not let cost be the only grounds on which we decide recycling's future.

Driving this litany of changes has been basic budgetary pressures. With the city facing large budget shortfalls, the Bloomberg Administration cut back the recycling program to save money. Many New Yorkers were dismayed by these cuts, and some have argued that recycling is more cost-effective than trash pick up. The fact is, however, that while the gap is narrowing, absent major changes to the recycling program, it will continue to be more expensive than simply throwing stuff away. It's time to acknowledge the cost, decide if we are willing to pay it or not, and work on ways to reduce it.

One reason for the extra cost of recycling is the dynamics of the recycling market. Metal and paper have remained on the city's recycling list over the past 18 months is because we receive money from commercial recyclers for each ton delivered; for plastic—and especially for glass—the market is weaker and the city must pay recyclers to take the material off our hands.

But as long as the cost of collection remains so much higher for recycling, it is not likely that it will be cost-competitive on a per ton basis with simply throwing stuff away.