

Recycling: Where does it really go?

BHCA's new Green Committee Co-Chairs Eve Waterfall of West Cedar Street and Diana Coldren of Joy Street are two of Beacon Hill's biggest recycling enthusiasts. But, like many others, they wondered what actually happens to recyclables after they are picked up at our curbs.

Last Monday morning they got their answer. Along with Executive Director Suzanne Besser, Waterfall and Coldren joined Mayor Thomas Menino and other recycling aficionados at the grand re-opening of the Casella Waste Systems "zero-sort" facility in Charlestown, where the city of Boston takes the bulk of its recycling.

The tour through the engineering marvel at Casella's plant showed why separating paper, plastic, glass and cans has become a thing of the past for Bostonians. Zero-sort (also known as "single-stream") recycling means that all recyclable items can now be mixed together. This increased convenience has resulted in increased participation in recycling and lower costs to the City.

But just how does Casella's sort and separate all those recyclables? Through a complex system of conveyor belts, cameras ("optical sorters"), air jets, magnets and screens, what enters as a jumble of single stream mixed materials neatly exits as segregated and compact bales of materials destined for reuse as aluminum cans, carpet, glass, paper products, and perhaps even your next fleece sweater.

First, the cameras recognize each type of numbered plastic and air jets blow individual items into separate storage containers. Then, screens with varying size holes sort smaller and larger items. High-power magnets use a form of reverse polarity to jettison cans. Eventually, remaining "fiber materials" such as paper and cardboard are deposited elsewhere for compacting. (Apparently recyclables do not need to be squeaky clean to be processed, but the cleaner the better to preserve the equipment and discourage curious critters - we all know who they are.)

Workers along the route act as quality control to remove anything that can hurt the machinery such as plastic bags, wire hangers, light bulbs and other non-recyclables or trash. From start to finish, the whole process for any given item takes about eight minutes with belts moving at approximately six hundred feet per minute. At the end of each day, Casella's has usually processed more than 750 tons of recyclables.

Does the City of Boston actually save money through recycling? Well, actually, yes. At current rates, the city pays \$34 for each ton of recycling it sends to Casella's Waste Systems. For each ton of trash sent to a landfill, the cost is \$80 per ton. In plain language, it is almost sixty percent cheaper to recycle, even in these unfavorable economic times. (That is a lot of tax dollars saved.) Casella's nearby Charlestown location makes the deal even sweeter by minimizing lengthy trucking costs.

With so many things that can be recycled, what things CANNOT be recycled curbside? The full list of recyclables is quite lengthy and can be found at www.cityofboston.gov/publicworks/recycling/default.asp. Some common items that cannot be recycled at curbside pickup include plastic bags (try your supermarket), Styrofoam (even if marked recyclable - in Boston it is trash), coat hangers (take these back to your drycleaner), ceramics, light bulbs, batteries or any hazardous materials. (Remember that those energy-saver lights bulbs that are so popular contain mercury and must be disposed of at a hazardous waste drop-off day or hopefully at the place of purchase if the seller will accept them back.)

How do I do curbside recycling? There are four choices on recycling day (Friday for Beacon Hill): you can use (1) a large, clear plastic bag for recycling, (2) the old rectangular recycling bin, (3) a 64 gallon City container; or (4) your own container with a City-supplied "Recycling" sticker on it. (In contrast, trash is supposed to be put out in black trash bags.)

Bottom Line. Recycling is now easy, saves lots of money and (to quote a certain mayor running for re-election) "will help turn Beantown into Greentown."