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Curbside composting? Yogurt container recycling? St. Paul embarks on "Recycle It Forward" citywide recycling assessment

5 March // Posted in City Hall Scoop // Tags: Anne Hunt, curbside compost collection, East Side, Eureka Recycling, Mac-Groveland, Patagonia, Recycle it Forward, sustainability Comments Off

Curbside composting? Yogurt container recycling? Yes, both could still happen. St. Paul has embarked on "Recycle It Forward," a citywide recycling assessment that asks residents what they're willing to recycle and how much they're willing to pay to get it recycled.

Last summer, Eureka Recycling embarked on a public campaign to get door-to-door compost collection added to the mayor's proposed city budget. Outdoor signs, posters and fold-out pamphlets urged voters to contact St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman's office, and many residents did.

However, instead of adopting the Eureka proposal, Coleman and several members of the St. Paul City Council, including Council 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 the powers that be 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.

Among their concerns, they noted that 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's 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: <http://www.macgrove.org/node/100>.

"There are a number of people, primarily on the west end of St. Paul, who really wanted curbside composting," Hunt said. "Why would we charge all these residents on the east side of St. Paul for a program they may not use?"

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Under the Eureka proposal, the nonprofit 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 their backyard compost bins. Eureka also would pick up an expanded list of plastics and allow residents to drop all of the items unsorted into one bin. The Eureka plan would have added an estimated \$23 per year to existing recycling fees.

The city did not adopt the Eureka plan, but city officials have embarked on a public information-gathering campaign called “Recycle It Forward.” They’ve created a website dedicated to recycling efforts here, <http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?nid=5105>, and asked residents to contribute their ideas and suggestions on the city’s online discussion forum, Open St. Paul.

Meanwhile, Ramsey County has used a \$100,000 grant to hire Wilder Research to conduct recycling surveys in each of the city’s seven political wards. The surveys went out about two weeks ago, and ask residents how much they’re willing to pay for recycling services, and what kinds of items they’d like to see picked up, among other questions.

Through its contract with Eureka Recycling, the city of St. Paul currently collects No. 1 and No. 2 plastics — such as plastic bottles of soda, milk and laundry detergent — at curbsides on a weekly basis, but other cities also pick up yogurt containers and plastic salad containers. “We don’t want to pick up anything at the curb that’s not going to get recycled,” said Anne Hunt, the mayor’s Sustainability and Environmental Policy Coordinator.

Focus groups are planned in March with non-participating communities and infrequent recyclers such as renters, newer immigrant groups such as the Hmong, Karen and Somali, and Latinos. “There’s more people coming from Central America and South America” to St. Paul, Hunt noted.

Ramsey County may do similar outreach to managers of rental properties to get at why they — or their tenants — have not embraced curbside recycling. “One of the big groups that we’ve identified is renters,” said Hunt. That’s a problem, seeing as the number of renters in St. Paul continues to climb.

Strategic outreach is planned to others in the recycling industry, including garbage haulers and the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

Hunt said it’s been at least a decade since St. Paul has undertaken a comprehensive citywide assessment of recycling efforts, and it’s about time to get one underway.

“There’s changing regulations from the state. The county has some additional areas they want us to look at. And the industry has changed a lot,” she said.

There may be lessons to be learned from Minneapolis, which recently adopted single-sort recycling, where residents can drop all their recyclables into one bin. The single-sort approach, by most accounts, seems to be working, boosting participation that, as in St. Paul, had previously leveled off.

“Minneapolis has had a very good response on their single stream,” Hunt said.

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

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has set a goal of reducing the amount of trash headed to landfills by 75 percent by the year 2030, and cities and counties are under pressure to comply. The MPCA has increased the alternative waste disposal requirements for the 87 counties, and Ramsey County has passed those requirements down to its individual member cities to figure out how best to live up to the task.

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

Some previous studies have shown that renters who grew up in neighborhoods that offered recycling were more likely to recycle than more transient folks who did not. There’s also the question of how best to get recycling information out to students and renters. “There’s a lot of young people that they’re not reading the daily newspaper, so we want to look at where they’re getting their information from,” Hunt said.

Communities such as Roseville and Falcon Heights are also looking at how best to recycle “bulkies,” or big bulky items such as couches and refrigerators. There’s also growing interest in how to dispose of electronics.

“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.

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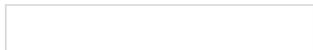
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For the green set, a number of upcoming environmental awards and events are on the horizon. Sustainable St. Paul nominations (<http://www.stpaul.gov/index.aspx?nid=429>) are due by March 15, with an awards ceremony planned for April 17.

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

The city plans to participate in "Earth Hour" again on March 23, when lights will go out for an hour at the State Capitol and in other buildings across the city, and across the world. The annual citywide clean-up is scheduled for April 13. Earth Day is April 22nd.

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