

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

China's ban on imported waste forces local governments to rethink recycling

By Carol A.O. Wolf / Photography by Jay Paul





Jaqueline Escobedo inspects newspaper for recycling at the Tidewater Fibre Corp. processing facility in Chester.



Recycling used to be so easy. Collect your paper, glass and plastic materials into your green rectangular bins or into one of those nifty new green cans with the blue lids, then make sure you get the materials to the curb before the recycling truck rolls by.

The truck driver stops every few houses, and two people jump off the truck and toss the recyclables in. You wave. They wave. All is good. If your son or daughter wants to see the recyclable materials squeezed in the back, the guys running behind the trucks have been known to pause for a moment to let young ones have a quick peek.

Answering a child's questions about where it goes after it leaves the curb used to be fairly simple, too. Once the truck returns to a processing facility in Chester, it is sorted on conveyor belts and compressed into huge cubes that are trucked to Norfolk, where they are placed on freighters that sail them to China. Once there, the heavy cubes are then off loaded and transformed into any variety of products that consumers will buy again.

Things are different now. Industry magazines, as well as national and international newspapers and journals, maintain that one of the consequences of President Donald Trump's trade wars has been that China last year stopped imports of two dozen types of solid waste, including varieties of plastic and unsorted paper. Recently, it extended the ban to steel waste, auto parts and numerous other materials.

Chinese officials have said that mate-

rials they receive from the United States are dirty and contaminated with old food (think pizza boxes and those plastic "to-go" containers and utensils), or are plastic shopping bags and various items that are not recyclable, such as broken toilets, dead animals, furniture and microwaves.

Whether political retaliation or a desire to crack down on pollution motivated China to stop taking the world's rubbish, the decision has upended global markets and left a \$200 billion industry in crisis. The New York Times reported this spring that recycling programs are collapsing in hundreds of cities and towns across America. Citing data from the World Bank, the Financial Times of London wrote that more than 270 million tons of waste are recycled around the world each year — equal to the weight of 740 Empire State buildings.

In Chesterfield County, rising costs associated with the practice led officials this spring to contemplate withdrawing from a regional curbside recycling program. Richmond officials also say they're considering their options.

Tad Phillips, general manager of the Richmond division Tidewater Fibre Corp. (TFC), is clearly frustrated. TFC, which has a four-year contract to work with the Central Virginia Waste Management Authority (CVWMA), has 400 employees statewide, with 150 working at the Chester plant from 6 a.m. to midnight five days a week.

Phillips says he is hopeful that the market will stabilize soon, but he notes that right now, the entire solid waste recycling industry is in a wild tailspin brought on by China's decisions. Markets for commodities such as cardboard and mixed paper have fallen dramatically in less than a year, leaving officials scrambling to find solutions.

Asked whether TFC is putting any of the recyclable waste into landfills because they have nowhere else to put it, Phillips bristles at the suggestion.

"The only time you would see a TFC truck at a landfill would be when we are dropping off the garbage people have



tossed into the recycle cans and which cannot be sold," he says.

The last 18 months have been hard for Kimberly Hynes, executive director of CVWMA. It is her job to help the 13 localities that are authority members implement solid waste management and recycling plans that comply with Virginia law.

"We have lots of ideas on ways we want to improve waste management in Central Virginia, but right now everything is literally in a holding pattern as we try to help our programs survive," she says. "If there is any solace to be had in this scenario ... it is that the world has finally been forced to rethink its approach to waste management and to reach out to other possible markets."

During a May 17 meeting, Hynes told her board of directors that she has been collaborating with former CVWMA board member Matt Benka, who works with the Virginia Israel Advisory Board (VIAB) and Tel Aviv-based UBQ Materials. UBQ converts waste into a material similar to plastic. Moreover, she noted, the company is interested in opening a plant in the United States.



Robert Lee (foreground) and Travis Barber pick up recycling on Richmond's South Side.

Hynes says that CVWMA ordered the first 2,000 recycling bins made from UBQ's converted waste material.

"I have always believed that part of the mission of a regional authority is that we work together for the greater good of all. By staying calm and working together to face challenges, we demonstrate regional cooperation at its highest level," she says.

Patricia O'Bannon, a member of the Henrico County Board of Supervisors, says she hopes that the current crisis will spur innovative entrepreneurs close to home to find ways to solve the challenge and create jobs.

"We should have never needed to send

our recyclables to China," O'Bannon says. She adds that she sees this as "an opportunity that needs help from state and federal resources as well as localities."

A Movement Is Born

To appreciate how and why recycling and environmental awareness entered the American psyche, consider the events of the 1960s and '70s that left many American families grief-stricken by the carnage of the Vietnam War and divided over protests for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, rights of people with disabilities and the fundamental right of all children to get an education in schools that were no longer

separate and had never been equal.

Combine the pathos of these events with the soul-shattering assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, and you begin to see why there arose an intense desire for something solid and sustainable that people could believe in, something that would help unite us at the most basic level — namely, that we are all Earthlings whose shared destinies depend on the health of our planet.

Less than a year after astronauts walked on the moon and sent back pictures of a seemingly fragile blue planet floating in isolated space, people in all parts of the United States celebrated the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970.

More than 20 million Americans took to the streets that day with rallies, protests, fundraisers, nature walks, speeches and concerts across the country. Parts of New York City were shut down as 20,000 people crowded into Union Square to see and hear actor Paul Newman, New York City Mayor John Lindsay and the poet Allen Ginsberg.

From that Earth Day, the modern environmental movement was born, along with a widespread effort to recycle solid waste. Led by groups such as the Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy, activists persuaded people of all ages, genders and political views to transcend tribal divisions and work together to protect and preserve the environment and wilderness areas. Since then, Earth Day has become the largest day of civic action in the world, according to the Earth Day Network. This year, more than a billion people across the globe participated.

To be sure, the event was also criticized. Naysayers dubbed the activists a bunch of tree-hugging, pot-smoking hippies. The late journalist I.F. Stone wrote, "The country is slipping into a wider world war in Southeast Asia, and we're sitting here talking about litterbugs."

But a national conscience was awakened, and the 1970s saw the most >

“RIGHT NOW EVERYTHING IS LITERALLY IN A HOLDING PATTERN AS WE TRY TO HELP OUR PROGRAMS SURVIVE.”

—Kimberly Hynes, CVWMA executive director

Clockwise from top: Esperanza Salvador inspects cardboard at the TFC processing facility in Chester; plant manager Andy Gupton; Chesterfield County Administrator Joseph Casey (center) attending a June 28 meeting on recycling; Kimberly Hynes of the CVWMA



comprehensive environmental legislation in history: the Clean Air Act, the Water Quality Improvement Act, the Endangered Species Act, the Toxic Substances Act, and the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. Then-President Richard M. Nixon heard the message and created the Environmental Protection Agency.

Thanks to the activists' relentless efforts, the message even penetrated the halls of the Virginia General Assembly, home of the oldest continuous law-making body in the New World and hardly a bastion of tree-hugging hippies.

Since 1970, Virginia agencies and commissions have produced more than 50 legislative reports studying elements of waste management and waste reduction.

According to Sanjay Thirunagari of the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), recycling has been mandatory in the state since 1989, when the General Assembly adopted legislation that set recycling rates for local governments. Those rates were: 10 percent by December 1991, 15 percent by 1993 and 25 percent by 1995. The current mandated recycling rate for Virginia, effective July 1, 2006, is either 15 percent or 25 percent, based on population density and area unemployment rates. Localities may adopt ordinances to require recycling by businesses.

This requirement is "one of the reasons behind having regional authorities with plans to address the ever-growing solid waste of paper, plastics and glass," Thirunagari says.

So why are Richmond-area localities rethinking their curbside recycling service? Why are environmental groups, government officials and residents worrying about the future of recycling not just here in Central Virginia but across the commonwealth, in all 50 states and around the globe?

Short answer: money.

Prices, Profit and People

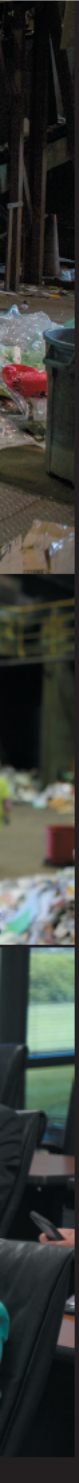
Prior to China's policy change, the sale of

recyclable materials to vendors willing to pick them up, shape them into cubes, ship them and sell them was lucrative enough that the vendors made money and were actually able to give rebates to the various localities. It was a win-win situation.

Not anymore. Officials from the Virginia DEQ met June 28 with approximately 40 representatives of the 13 member localities of CVWMA, including government employees, elected officials

and vendors. The meeting's purpose was to obtain feedback on how DEQ can help improve solid waste management in Virginia brought on by China's policy changes. It was one of several gatherings that DEQ officials have had across the state as they prepare a report on "The Future of Recycling" due to the General Assembly on Nov. 1.

The June meeting began with statements that recent media coverage concerning the future of curbside recycling



in Central Virginia has been misleading. “We are not the bad guys here,” Chesterfield County Administrator Joseph Casey said. “We want to find the best possible solution to the challenges before our communities. We are asking questions, and I know everyone wants to work together.”

According to the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Casey told the CVWMA in March that the amount the county pays to subsidize the recycling program tripled in the past year from \$231,000 to \$767,000.

Richmond’s cost for curbside recycling grew from about \$2.1 million in 2017-18 to about \$2.7 million in 2018-19, according to CVWMA figures.

Last year, with little to no fanfare, City Council raised the recycling charge to 61,558 households with recycling bins from \$2.50 a month to \$2.99 a month; the most recent approved budget did not include an increase in the recycling fee.

Henrico County, which covers the cost of curbside recycling for about 85,000 households, expects an increase of about \$600,000 for fiscal year 2019-20, according to spokesman Steve Knockemus.

In Goochland County, where more than 1,600 households in participating subdivisions pay for curbside recycling, the fee increased July 1 from \$25 per year to \$40 per year. There is no charge for residents to drop off items at recycling collection centers.

The price increases are putting pressure on local government budgets, leading to discussions about possible alternatives for handling recycling programs.

“We’re asking questions, we’re looking for feedback and we’re staying open-minded,” Leslie Haley, chair of the Chesterfield County Board of Supervisors, said during a meeting in April, according to the Chesterfield Observer. “We’re saying, ‘Do we have the right business model?’”

In June, a Style Weekly article quoted Richmond Department of Public Utilities spokeswoman Sharon North as saying the city might end curbside recycling because of rising costs. Asked by Richmond magazine about her com-

COSTS FOR CURBSIDE RECYCLING

	2017-2018	2018-2019 (annualized, based on first 11 months)
RICHMOND	\$2,108,147	\$2,654,162
HENRICO	\$1,921,432	\$2,517,352
CHESTERFIELD	\$2,121,431	\$2,622,659

Source: Central Virginia Waste Management Authority

ment, North emphasized that there is no imminent cessation planned.

“I simply stated that we are weighing all options,” she says, “and closely monitoring the price increases. Period.”

Still, such comments prompted an emotional response. From teary-eyed children who cannot imagine their lives without recycling to busy parents and grandparents who have been recycling for decades, officials heard via phone calls, text messages, appearances at public hearings and on social media that residents weren’t happy with the budget-cutting ideas.

“What’s next? No more sewage treatment?” Richmonder Ric Bellizzi fumed on Facebook. “The U.S. is turning into a Third World country.”

In Richmond, 2nd District City Council member Kim Gray says she has heard from several constituents who do not want to see their curbside recycling discontinued. Gray notes: “Our city is changing, and we are experiencing a growth of new residents who see curbside recycling as a part of life. I would like to see people work together and generate new business ventures that could address these needs in a cost-conscious and socially responsible way.”

As the world adjusts to this new normal, those most familiar with the financial challenges of recycling asked DEQ representatives for some help. Among the ideas presented at the June meeting:

- More money is needed to provide financial incentives for entrepreneurs to buy the equipment necessary for recycling.
- An emphasis should be placed on

reducing and reusing.

- Some suggested “a bottle bill,” the proceeds of which could help offset the costs of recycling glass.
- Others proposed the introduction of financial incentives for businesses, especially those that rely on cardboard packaging and plastic bags, to reduce and recycle their own packaging.
- Ban plastic bags and straws.

Mary Anne Conmy, a local recycling advocate and a proponent of “zero waste,” sees the solution to the recycling question as far deeper than whether the various localities can find the money to continue to offer curbside recycling.

“Fundamentally, people need to do something about their addiction to ‘stuff,’” she says. “We have to stop buying so much stuff — those Amazon bags, boxes, containers ... Quit buying all that pointless bottled water, people. Carry reusable grocery bags. Stop buying one-time-use products — it is really not difficult for anyone to cut back on their unnecessary use of plastic.”

Glen Besa, retired director of the Sierra Club’s Virginia chapter, agrees. But he believes the current crisis is an opportunity for CVWMA to get serious about regional cooperation.

“The whole idea of having a regional authority is to help unify people to work together to find solutions,” he says. Rather than looking for ways to cut money from recycling, he would like to see government officials consider ways that businesses could be created to help with the “greening of America,” both environmentally and economically. 