

Cash in the Trash Forum

Nov. 20, 2008

Newton Free Library

Trash Talk. Waste reduction? This year (2008-09) the League of Women Voters of Newton Environmental Committee has focused on garbage. How does it translate in carbon emissions? How much does it really cost? Why would the city adopt an automated trash collection system?

After several committee discussions, the Environmental Committee, led by Beth Lowd and Lucia Dolan, realized that wider community education was needed. The first of at least two forums, held on Nov. 20, included two speakers, from the state and the city, to address rubbish in depth (their slideshows are available on the Newton League website: www.lwvnewton.org).

The Druker Auditorium was packed with League members and co-sponsors: Green Decade Coalition/Newton, the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce, Newton for Fiscal Responsibility (NFFR), the Newton Free Library, the Newton TAB, and the Newton Solid Waste Committee.

The State Picture and PAYT

Much of the landscape for trash and recycling has changed, said **Brooke Nash**, branch chief for solid waste at the state Department of Environmental Protection. Some of that change has been slow—as landfills are capped and the price of “disposal” climbs. Some are more dramatic, like the drop in the price of commodities after the financial meltdown this fall.

Meanwhile, the number of firms in the trash collection business has increased, and the marketplace is quite favorable to municipalities looking to save tax dollars. Processing of recyclables—which basically means sorting—has been “revolutionized,” also affording savings.

And as the East coast has been sitting on its recycling laurels for the past decade, the West Coast has moved ahead—increasing their rates and moving into such cutting-edge recycling efforts as food waste recovery.

Single-stream recycling, which Newton is including on the six pilot routes with automatic collection, is also being tested in Boston. Already they are seeing 50% more material being recycled. While single-stream might increase recycling some in Newton, it probably won't be as dramatic here, Nash said, because Newton is already recycling at a respectable rate.

Nash explored other ways of increasing recycling and decreasing waste, but noted that all had large operating costs for small percentage increases.

The most effective and lowest cost method, Nash said, is pay-as-you-throw. Already 124 communities in the state do it—reducing their trash costs and creating a “disincentive” to trash. (Note: it is also first on the Citizen Advisory Group’s list of recommended ways to increase city revenue). In typical communities, recycling rates jump to 60 percent. Average for Massachusetts non-PAYT communities is 39 percent, Nash said.

PAYT doesn't always translate into higher collections of recyclables, Nash said—sometimes items that would have been trashed are instead advertised on Craig's List or donated to charities.

The system can use either bags or stickers. Newton could also charge a flat fee for the first barrel and have PAYT for anything that overflows. This also means the cost variables—such as disposal fees—are covered by the PAYT system instead of being drawn from tax revenue.

The challenges of PAYT are getting it right—it takes education and transparency, Nash said. People see PAYT as a tax, which makes it a hard sell. And the start up costs are fairly steep. However, the DEP has grants to help with that.

The downsides of PAYT are that since trash fees are not a tax, they cannot be deducted from federal income tax returns. Illegal dumping, Nash said, is rare.

The Local Picture

Newton currently pays \$6.8 million for trash and recycling, said Tom Daley, the head of the city's Department of Public Works. This makes waste the

single largest line item in the DPW budget of \$18.7 million.

The single stream experiment was calculated to earn the city several thousands of dollars—but that was before the market crash and the decimation of the commodities markets (recycling that used to earn the city \$100/ton was recently bringing in \$5/ton).

But still, solid waste—or trash--disposal doesn't bring in \$5/ton; it costs the city \$152/ton or \$4.4 million for about 29,000 tons a year. It's not just expensive, it's polluting, Daley said. Recycled plastic requires ¼ the amount of oil that virgin plastic does. Recycling 100 tons of office paper saves 529 barrels of oil, or the equivalent in carbon emissions of 49 cars driving for one year.

The reason the city is looking at automated trash collection is to reduce collection costs. By pairing it with single-stream recycling system, it makes recycling easier for residents to use, thus raising recycling rates.

Automated collection is happening in six separate routes. They were picked because they represented the toughest situations they could find, Daley said. So far, they had discovered that only three areas in Nonantum were posing difficulties for the auto pickup.

Anyone having difficulty with automatic or regular trash pickup is welcome to call the department's environmental affairs director, Elaine Gentile, at 796-1471.

Questions were mostly friendly, asking about other items that could be recycled or business recycling options. One man asked how the recycling and auto trash pickup numbers stacked up, and Daley invited him to come and review the budget at his convenience. "We wouldn't be doing this if we weren't saving money," he said.

Jeff Seidman of NFFR asked whether the trash and recycling contracts would be competitively bid. Daley said that decision was up to the mayor, but that probably a new contract would be signed in January, since it would have to start in July of 2010.

Further coverage of the discussion:

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/newton/archive/x1720663853/Newton-considers-tightening-its-waste>

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/newton/archive/x776449674/Roche-Newton-trash-collection-Savings-service-sustainability-subsidy>

<http://www.wickedlocal.com/newton/archive/x776449654/Striar-Newton-trash-collection-idea-stinks>