



It's time to rethink recycling in Virginia

By Monica Boehringer

RECYCLING ISN'T SOMETHING new, it's been around since people began using (and reusing) tools. It's only recently, however, that it seems to have become more complicated. In fact, just a generation ago, recycling was simply part of being thrifty. Some of us remember a grandmother's drawer with the endless supply of twist ties or the rubber band ball that was kept to the side "just in case." Others recall those hand-me-down dresses or bikes, or that neighbor who seemed to have whatever part was needed tucked away in his garage. My memory is of my mother's compost pile for her garden. Nothing went to waste. When you stop to think about it, everybody has a story of someone who knew how to reduce, reuse and recycle. So, why has recycling become so hard for people to understand? What's the problem?

Recyclables aren't trash!

Drawers full of odds and ends, hand-me-downs, garages full of just-in-case parts and compost piles all have one big thing in common: they help to reduce waste. Solid waste management is an essential part of a community's infrastructure. As with any essential service – the sewer system, the electrical grid, etc. – if part of the solid waste system malfunctions, the consequences can have costly, long-term effects. Unrecyclable trash being included with recycling is a common, and expensive, problem for many community's solid waste systems. This has led some jurisdictions to suspend their recycling programs, resulting in business closures, job losses and valuable materials being sent to landfills.

Recycling is a commodity and, just like soybeans or wheat, it is traded on the global market. The value of recyclable commodities such as plastic, aluminum and cardboard rises and falls based on demand. China, traditionally the biggest buyer of recyclable materials from the United States, purchases, on average, over \$6 billion worth of materials for use in manufacturing. In January 2018, China imposed a ban on the import of recyclable materials due to the volume of "contamination." More than a quarter of all the material they paid

for was trash and not recyclable. Imagine buying a bag of potatoes – and then finding out that a quarter of the bag was rotten. Now, imagine you paid \$6 billion for it! You wouldn't go back for more.

Obstacles to overcome; opportunities to seize

Recycling is increasingly a vital component of a community's identity and valuable economic resource. So, why is Virginia not dealing with the issue of contamination and supporting opportunities to develop recyclable materials in Virginia? It comes down to three things: regulation, communication, and opportunity.

The Virginia Recycling Association supports:

- **Regulatory Review**
 - A formal review of existing legislation.
 - The development of a new statewide program to establish standards for collection, processing and reporting recyclable materials.
- **Communication**
 - A statewide outreach program of accurate education and information.
 - Clear and accurate labeling to help the public understand what to recycle, how to prepare it for recycling and where recycling needs to be taken.
- **Opportunity**
 - Partnerships among the state government, local governments and private enterprises to encourage, stimulate, and support development and expansion of domestic markets for the sale of Virginia's recyclables.

Regulation. Virginia’s outdated regulation system lacks the structure necessary to effectively manage recycling. Many parts of the Virginia Waste Management Act have not been updated in over 30 years! There is no legislation to provide guidance for curbside recycling programs. There is no legislation that governs registration and management of Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs) that process recycling. In fact, what little information there is regarding recycling is under the heading of “litter control.” Just as real litter shouldn’t be mixed with recyclables, litter and recycling should not be combined when addressing waste issues. Recycling should not be preceded by “and” in our legislation or in our economy. Unlike litter, recycling is not a problem to be dealt with, it’s an industry that provides a valuable resource.

Communication. Misinformation about what can be recycled in a given locality has led to “wishful recycling” by citizens who put everything from clothing to garden hoses, food to lead pipes, (and even kitchen sinks!) in with their recycling in the hope that it will somehow be recycled or will be sorted out without compromising the actual recyclables.

Opportunity. As discussed above, reducing trash in recycling is a big challenge. However, it is also crucial to domestic recycling that we find new markets for our materials. Imagine if instead of looking abroad, MRFs could profitably sell their resource to manufacturers within the United States? As it is, the domestic options for MRFs are limited and when they do exist are often unable to take local recyclables.

For example, glass is one of the most difficult materials to recycle in Virginia because we lack facilities to clean and sort the glass that Virginians generate. Each year, Owens Illinois (O-I), which has large facilities in Danville and Toano, uses over 1 billion pounds of recycled

glass from curbside consumer containers and pre-consumer sources in Tennessee and Pennsylvania, but none from Virginia. Because we are unable to provide clean, sorted glass, the material that we could be selling to large manufacturers like O-I goes straight to landfills. (Source: 2011 Container Recycling Institute.)

Recycling by the numbers:

- The recycling industry contributes over \$1.7 billion to the Virginia economy.
- According to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, the volume of reported recyclable material in 2017 was 2,596,863 tons.
- Recycling 1,000 tons of glass creates slightly over 8 jobs.
- Manufacturers use recycled materials in hundreds of products: sunglasses, carpeting, designer shoes, air bags... the list goes on and on.

The Virginia Recycling Association works with businesses to promote the manufacture of recyclable materials as a resource providing jobs and economic growth to communities in Virginia. We encourage citizens to familiarize themselves with their own recycling operations and the challenges they face. This is a problem that many communities are waking up to and solutions require understanding how each locality recycles. Get involved and help support our efforts so that more of what Virginians use can be used again. 

About the author: *Monica Boehringer is the Vice President of the Virginia Recycling Association.*

