

Reduce. Reuse. Repair. Recycle?

written by Newspark Team | September 4, 2019



[jump-link]The end of recycling as you know it. You feel fine?[/jump-link]

On any given weekday, more than 2,000 green bins line the streets of residential Charlottesville, awaiting a rumbling, beeping white truck that will launch the contents of the bins on the first leg of a one-way trip to a landfill, or, at best, a very long trip around the world before it is reborn as a new consumer product.

This is single-stream recycling, a jumble of materials that, by definition, all have to be separated and transferred at huge scale to manufacturers that can use them as raw material for a new product.

[mini-article-link id="70938"]At the center of town, another 350 or so people — mostly Albemarle County residents — will bring their own hand-sorted recyclables to the McIntire Recycling Center as free offerings to the manufacturing gods[/mini-article-link]. A few more residents will drop off batches of recycling in the bins at the Ivy landfill or at the paper-sorting facility on Meade Avenue.



McIntire Recycling Center. Credit: Credit: Skyclad Aerial Charlottesville Tomorrow

It's an odd, and sometimes confusing, arrangement, presenting city and county residents with a variety of choices but very little clear direction or guidance regarding the economic and environmental impact of our individual decisions. What's the best way to recycle our stuff? Single-stream with industrial-scale processing? Or lovingly sorting it our own hands?

That's really what people want to know, because they want to believe that [\[mini-article-link id="70940"\]](#)meeting the state's requirement that 25% of waste be recycled by municipal authorities means that we aren't really doing so badly[\[/mini-article-link\]](#). But, of Virginia's 17 solid waste planning units that are required to report recycling rates, our local recycling agency is among the worst in the state, with a rate of 32.2%. That's in stark contrast to Richmond, for instance, where the reported recycling rate is 59%.

Of course, none of this means much because reporting is not audited and reporting agencies can choose their own methods of calculating their rates.

Our region falls into the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission Solid Waste Planning Unit, which includes Charlottesville and the counties of Albemarle, Fluvanna and Greene. The solid waste planning unit also lags far behind the state's overall recycling rate of 42.8%, according to Virginia Department of Environmental Quality data from 2017, the most recent year available.

Numbers and methodology aside, the bigger questions — whether decisions of this magnitude should even be left to individual consumers and officials at the local level, and [\[mini-article-link id="70941"\]](#)whether we should be hauling recyclable garbage anywhere[\[/mini-article-link\]](#), much less around the world — seem to have been skipped over entirely.

The truth is, the system is failing, but no one seems able to fix it. The collapse of a local single-stream facility, recent Chinese policies limiting the import of recyclables, scant state oversight and the reliance on market incentives, rather than regulatory muscle, has created a problem that has entire communities, from homeowners associations to cities, [\[mini-article-link id="70942"\]](#)canceling their recycling programs[\[/mini-article-link\]](#).

[\[jump-link\]](#)An impossible job done heroically sorta well[\[/jump-link\]](#)

In a story like this, there are no good guys — we're all polluting the land around us from the moment we wake up to the moment we fall asleep. But there also aren't obvious bad guys, at least at the local level.

Take Phil McKalips, the man who is tasked with finding an appropriate destination for more than 11,000 tons of local refuse each year. McKalips fields several calls a week from residents and reporters who, like me, want to know to what extent their

[\[mini-article-link id="70952"\]](#) 2,500 tons of hand-separated recyclables[\[/mini-article-link\]](#)

are in fact being [\[mini-article-link id="70943"\]](#)recycled[\[/mini-article-link\]](#).



Phil McKallips talks trash. Credit: Credit: Stacey Evans Charlottesville Tomorrow

As I settle in to talk trash with him, I accept a warm cup of Keurig coffee he offered in a disposable cup. The single-serve Keurig pod and the cup both fall into the category of plastics that McKalips' agency no longer accepted for recycling [\[mini-article-link id="70944"\]](#)as of July 1[\[/mini-article-link\]](#).

[\[mini-article-link id="70945"\]](#)RSWA to reduce types of accepted recyclables[\[/mini-article-link\]](#)

I cringe silently, but my mind also wanders back to my own stack of used Keurig pods accumulating in my kitchen, the disposable lunch containers my children bring home from school a few days each week, the scads of Styrofoam we collect from BBQ joints and the mountain of diapers and baby food pouches we've consumed over the years.

"I try not to torment myself by thinking too much about policy," said McKalips, whose official title is director of solid waste for the Rivanna Solid Waste Authority. "That should happen way up there at the beginning of the [legislative and manufacturing] process[es]. It's impossible to achieve success when you're trying to solve everything at the end of the process."

As McKalips described the myriad methods RSWA uses to dispose of garbage, I suddenly pictured him as a character in a new Mario Brothers Nintendo game. Call it "Ultimate Super Trash Bros."

In the imaginary game, packaging made from virtually every chemical on the periodic table rains down on Super Phil. He skitters from side to side, collecting coins and garbage, smashing glass and cans with each jump. He hurls the coins to open new trash portals. But every few seconds, a new opponent appears onscreen and blows up the portal. When Super Phil runs out of coins or portals, his character dies — entombed in glass and cans.

Needless to say, there's no way to win Ultimate Super Trash Bros. It doesn't mean you don't play.

[jump-link]Recycling systems were built backwards[/jump-link]

[mini-article-link id="70946"]"A lot of people forget that the only reason there is recycling is to create a feedstock for industry - for some manufacturer who has decided it's preferable to use a recycled material, either because it's cheaper or because it gives them a sales tool to sell their product," McKalips said. "But you know there are some [materials] we just don't have that for."[/mini-article-link]

Anyone can use the RSWA's recycling facilities, which are funded jointly by Albemarle and the city of Charlottesville, with cost-sharing determined by occasional surveys of the users who show up at the McIntire, Ivy and Meade Avenue facilities. The RSWA reports its annual hauling data up to the Thomas Jefferson Solid Waste Planning Unit, along with other local jurisdictions, the University of Virginia, private haulers and a few large companies.

[mini-article-link id="70947"]Budget for fiscal year 2019[/mini-article-link]

Most residential garbage in the county - and probably most of its recycling - is handled by private haulers like County Waste and Time Disposal, both of which rent out separate bins for recyclables. [mini-article-link id="70954"]While officials told me that a third of most "trash" actually is recyclable, and another third is compostable, private haulers' numbers show we're throwing away an opportunity to do right by our environment[/mini-article-link]. (For 2018, County Waste told regional planners it hauled 37,445 tons of municipal solid waste from Albemarle, Greene and Fluvanna counties, along with just 5,572 tons of recyclables. As of this writing, Time had not yet reported its 2018 numbers.)

[mini-article-link id="70948"]Budget for fiscal year 2020[/mini-article-link]

City residents who use the city's contractor to pick up their curbside trash and recycling are relying on County Waste and its single-stream recycling system.

Unlike customers outside the city, Charlottesville residents do not pay extra for this single-stream recycling can; in fact, the city incentivizes recycling by charging residents per garbage bag or for trash cans.

Like Albemarle, residents of Charlottesville are welcome to use the free RSWA recycling facilities, as long as the material they bring is clean and dry and sorted properly. It's certainly less convenient than a single curbside can, but the difference lies in where those materials end up.

At McIntire, the RSWA accepts a wide variety of materials, including rigid plastic containers marked with a 1 or 2, various papers and cardboard, aluminum and steel cans and tins, glass and polyethylene plastic bags and overwrap.

The RSWA will accept only those materials for which McKalips and his team have customers under contract to buy the product. To reduce costs and the carbon footprint associated with transportation, [mini-article-link id="70949"]RSWA tries to ensure the materials stay within the region - that's why they've chosen to send unmarketable plastics 3-7 to local landfills[/mini-article-link].

The RSWA's rigid standards are a tough sell for area residents who had grown accustomed to the convenience they enjoyed before the 2018 closure of the [mini-article-link id="70950"]van der Linde recycling facility[/mini-article-link]. The facility had marketed itself as being able to separate recyclable materials from commingled trash — and mislabeled it "single-stream recycling." But the presence of heavily-soiled trash made most of that facility's bales unmarketable, particularly once China stopped accepting contaminated material altogether.

"We're still dealing with the ripple effects" of that all-in-one approach and the decision to close that facility, said Kristel Riddervold, who runs the city of Charlottesville's environmental sustainability efforts and was part of a panel of city officials we interviewed, as a group, about the city's approach to recycling.

[mini-article-link id="70953"]Recycling on Grounds[/mini-article-link]



Glass that is set to be recycled sits in a pile in a staging area. Credit: Credit: Skyklad Aerial/Charlottesville Tomorrow

[jump-link]So you recycled in Charlottesville. What happened next?[/jump-link]

For 2018, County Waste reported that it had hauled 8,677 tons of municipal solid waste from Charlottesville city curbs to landfills. Separately, it reported collecting 4,430 tons of commingled curbside recycling.

Technically, that's about a 34% recycling rate in a region shooting for 25%. However, it's unclear how much of that recycling was really recycled.

[mini-article-link id="70951"]“Just because something is collected, doesn’t mean it’s recycled.”[/mini-article-link]

Based on my conversations with companies that buy recycled material from the RSWA, it’s evident that single-stream recyclers, like County Waste, face even greater challenges finding outlets for their collections.

But they appear loath to talk about it.

Time Disposal did not respond to an interview request. Jay Zook, the spokesman for County Waste, did not respond to messages asking for information about where the company sells the plastic categories that the RSWA will no longer accept, although he acknowledged “the recycl[ing] markets continue to be a challenge,” and said the company was currently evaluating whether to eliminate those categories.

Behind the gates of County Waste’s single-stream recycling facility outside of Richmond, Google Earth’s satellite imagery shows a road connecting the facility to a landfill. In a more transparent environment, we would know exactly how frequently that road is used. Instead, with light regulation and toothless reporting requirements, we can only hope it’s the road less traveled.

In its 2014 contract negotiations with the city, County Waste made very few explicit promises about the final disposition of the city’s materials. According to city officials, there’s little economic incentive for County Waste to use that road to send recyclable loads straight to the landfill, rather than processing them to pull out marketable materials.

If nothing else, the city pays County Waste less to haul its recyclables than it pays for hauling solid waste so — at a minimum — reselling aluminum cans and glass may help the company recoup the hauling costs.

“The contract does require that they recycle everything,” said Marty Silman, the director of the city’s public service division. “But there’s a reality that, if the market changes and they can’t do anything, we’re bound to acknowledge that.”

The city and County Waste signed the original \$292,000 per year contract in 2014 and recently renewed it for another year. In the meantime, Silman said, he’s grateful County Waste will still attempt to process plastics 3 through 7 (unlike RSWA’s facilities), and he hopes residents across the region will continue to recycle — including taking separated materials to McIntire when appropriate or convenient.

“I’d rather maintain what we’re doing, because the market will come back,” he said. “If people get out of the habit of recycling, when the market returns — and I believe it will — we would have to retrain the community.”

[jump-link]She’s doing her part. Are you?[/jump-link]

The day after my interview with the city, I hauled my in-laws’ recyclables from Old Trail — where they’ve stopped offering recycling service — to the McIntire Recycling Center. While I was there, Freedom Duff, a 41-year-old Charlottesville resident, pulled up in a Mini Cooper stuffed to the roof with bottles and cans.



"I think we've been sold this idea that we can just chuck it all in and it will be magically fairy-sorted," Duff says. Credit: Credit: Stacey Evans Charlottesville Tomorrow

Duff had forgotten to pull her already full green city bin out that week and now was paying the price.

"This has been a huge part of my week. I spent Sunday emptying out my bin and dividing everything up," she said. "I brought one Mini Cooper full of things here on Monday; then I tried to come back on Tuesday, but they were closed."

She compared the laborious task to her memories of working at Integral Yoga in the 1990s, and how hard the employees there had to work back then to recycle everything as a matter of principle. Between the "old days" and this week's experience handling her own waste, she was feeling more appreciative than ever for her curbside bin.

Then we talked a bit about where McIntire's materials end up and the potential problems with recyclables that go into those curbside "all-in-one" cans. As her eyes widened, I asked her whether that information could affect her choices.

"Wow, absolutely!" she said. "I think most people, if they knew that, would change their [behavior]. I think we've been sold this idea that we can just chuck it all in and it will be magically fairy-sorted."

*This article has been updated to correct a math error in "So you recycled in Charlottesville. What happened next?"*