

Why Can't We Recycle That Any More?

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Yesterday, a bunch of hardy volunteers and I braved the frosty conditions and helped with the annual Holiday Recycling Day. I appreciate everyone who came out with Christmas trees, paper, metal, and other recyclable materials. We kept a lot of waste out of the landfill, and instead gave it another chance at usefulness.

Several people expressed concern that we were not taking glass or Styrofoam this year. I apologize for any confusion this caused. This was a decision made because the companies that bought these materials from us no longer will, due to economic reasons.

Economics can get very complicated. Let me explain...no, there's too much. Let me sum up:

- * To make an object, you need to mine or grow the raw materials, ship them to a processor, ship them to another processor, and finally ship them to the company that makes the finished product.
- * The cost of an item is based not only on the amount of resources it takes to make the item (including the fuel needed to ship it), but on the value of raw material it's made from.
- * Metal ores must be mined to make cans; trees must be cut down to make paper; petroleum must be pumped out of the ground to make plastic. Glass is made of sand, which can be shoveled up from a number of places. And unlike iron, aluminum, trees or oil, I don't think we're going to run out of sand any time soon.
- * Recycling works because it is economically beneficial (cheaper) to do so. We don't need to buy bauxite ore and pay for the energy to process it into pure aluminum; we skip those steps and expenses by reusing aluminum cans.
- * Local "recycling centers" are actually only collection centers. They buy materials like newspaper and glass from consumers, and then sell them to the companies that actually process (recycle) the material. Before they can sell it, though, they have to sort it (get the steel cans out of the aluminum cans), compress it, and ship it, all of which costs money.

* The big national companies that actually do the recycling will pay X dollars per pound for the material. If it costs local recycling centers more than X dollars to collect, sort, and ship the material, then they lose money with each load.

* Wesselman Nature Society, which manages the recycling program for the solid waste district, gives the steel and glass to local recycling centers at no charge. Basically, they can't even give glass away for free at this point.

* If a company loses money each day, they go out of business.

And this, in a nutshell, explains why glass is no longer being collected. The companies that can use it will only pay pennies for it. The local collection companies spend more in fuel shipping it to the recyclers than they get paid. And no business stays in business for long if they can't make money, even if recycling is "the right thing to do."