

Waste Not Want Not in Chicago

“Pretty much everything can be recycled or reused.”

That was Bryant Williams talking--the Manager of Engineering Services for the Cook County Department of Environmental Services. Williams is one of a new breed of people trained in the environmental sciences who look at waste and see gold—as in golden opportunities to recycle more stuff, lower pollution, and save energy. Jean Pogge, the CEO of the Delta Institute, a Chicago-based nonprofit that spearheads environmental initiatives, added, “Looking at waste is like looking at plumbing. It’s behind the scenes, but it’s very important.”

All by itself, Chicago produces lots and lots of trash—892,034 tons in 2012. That’s an astounding 657 pounds of waste for every man, woman, and child. A century ago, the average Chicagoan tossed out only 95 pounds of trash a year, but since those simpler times, the nation’s economy has changed radically. We buy lots more things, and it all comes wrapped in plastic, metal, paper, or wood. And we throw away most of that packaging.

Luckily, we as a nation are learning to recycle more and more of this stuff. According to America the Beautiful, a nonprofit dedicated to recycling, the United States recycled 34 percent of its trash in 2009—about 82 million tons. The country boasts about 9,000 curbside recycling programs, reducing pollution and saving energy and natural resources. After all, if we’re reusing paper, we’re not cutting down more trees to grind into pulp. Recycling also lowers emissions of carbon dioxide, which is the primary greenhouse gas implicated in climate change. In fact, the reduction of CO₂ from recycling is like taking 33 million cars off the road.

Recycling not only helps the environment, but it creates jobs. Nationally, the recycling industry employs about 1.1 million workers. A good example of the economic payoff is Republic Services, a recycling and waste disposal corporation with 76 recovery facilities that employ more than 30,000 people in 39 states and Puerto Rico. Republic operates a recovery facility on the South Side, on the footprint of the old Union Stockyards.

On August 9, Republic’s Chicago-based General Manager, Brian Holcomb, led a group of interested citizens on a tour of its South Side facility. The Southeast Environmental Task Force—which advocates for a cleaner environment in that corner of the city—sponsored the tour. Republic has contracts to collect solid



The Rebuilding Exchange, a 25,000-foot warehouse at 1740 Webster Avenue in Chicago stocks a huge inventory of recycled building materials, from light fixtures to flooring. Photo courtesy of Melinda Meyers.

waste and sort it into recycled materials and trash. Because landfills can no longer be used in the city, the company carts trash that can’t be recycled to landfills in downstate Illinois and Indiana. But the stuff that can be recycled goes through a careful categorizing process. At a sorting line, sorters separate recycled materials from other trash. They then separate cardboard from other paper and aluminum from other metals. They sort glass by color and plastics by type. Workers gather these materials into large batches weighing anywhere from 1600 pounds to 1800 pounds. Republic then sells the recycled materials to companies that specialize in turning recycled materials into new products. The cardboard becomes new cartons or facing paper for gypsum board. From the aluminum, manufacturers create new beverage containers. Glass can become items for homes, such as back splashes. Plastic is transformed into new plastic containers, carpeting, and even clothing.

If the benefits of recycling are so apparent and obvious, how are Chicago and Cook County doing in reducing its vast amount

of waste and recycling more stuff? To answer that question, recycling specialists look at three things: recycling for individual residences, recycling for multi-unit dwellings, and recycling of materials from construction and demolition.

Let's start with individual residences, which include dwellings of up to four units. Chicago's first foray into recycling was the infamous blue bags, in which you had to purchase blue bags, sort your recyclables, and leave them to be picked up by recycling crews. Put simply, it was a disaster. The amount of stuff recycled was less than 10 percent.

During his mayoral campaign, Rahm Emanuel promised to do better, and in 2011, he announced the blue cart program, in which individual residences would get bright blue carts and trucks would come around and pick up the recyclables. By the end of 2013, the city finally finished rolling out the carts to individual residences—all 600,000 of them. Two private companies and the Department of Streets and Sanitation are handling the recycling in different parts of the city.

Critics claim, though, that the city hasn't done a good job educating the public about how to recycle properly. Mike Nowak, the president of the Chicago Recycling Coalition and host of a talk show on WCPT-AM about gardening and the environment, said,

“It's up to motivated residents to start a recycling program. It puts the onus on residents.”

“People need to learn how to use the blue carts. In a property near us, people put garbage in the blue cart. The company that handles recycling won't take the garbage in the cart because it's contaminated. Streets and Sanitation won't pick it up because the garbage is in a blue cart. So it just sits there, attracting rats and flies. We need many more public service announcements and other educational efforts.”

Despite these problems, the blue cart program has at least gotten Chicago onto the recycling map vis à vis individual residences. How has the progress been in getting high-rise condos and apartments to recycle? Well, as Jon Stewart might say, “Not so much.” According to a city ordinance, apartment owners or managers are supposed to put in recycling programs, but according to Nowak, most of them don't. He explained, “Each building handles recycling differently, which is a big problem. Also, the city doesn't enforce the ordinance. So, it's up to motivated residents to start a recycling program. It puts the onus on residents.”

When it comes to recycling construction and demolition debris, the picture is more optimistic. When you drive down a street and see a building being torn down, have you ever wondered what happens to that stuff—of which there is a lot? According to Bryant Williams, “In 2013, there were 496,000 tons of demolition and construction debris. This includes wood, concrete, asphalt, rubber membrane from roofs, glass, aluminum siding, carpeting (which is tough to recycle), and bricks.”

Traditionally, forty percent of the material went to landfills. In 2012, though, the Cook County Board passed an ordinance re-

quiring more recycling of construction and demolition materials in the county. According to Williams, “The ordinance was driven by President Toni Preckwinkle and was intended to face the issue that Cook County is running out of space for landfills.” The ordinance sets the goal of diverting at least 70 percent of construction and demolition debris into reuse.

A surprising amount of this stuff can be repurposed. Williams said, “People reuse lumber for furniture. Metals have high value. Bricks can be reused. Bricks made now have hollow cores, but the traditional Chicago bricks are solid, and there's a big market for them.” Other goodies that can be reused include light fixtures and kitchen cabinets—if they're in good condition. Builders can also reuse floor joists and lumber for new projects. Williams said, “We're hitting about 88 percent of waste reuse now in suburban Cook County.”

The local market for recycled materials is surprisingly robust. Habitat for Humanity sells materials for reuse at its Habitat ReStore, located at 6040 N. Pulaski. Other local warehouses for recycled building materials are the Evanston ReBuilding Warehouse (2101 Dempster Street), and the Rebuilding Exchange (1740 Webster Avenue in Chicago). All the warehouses take donations from individual homeowners who

have undertaken rebuilding or remodeling projects.

The Delta Institute has helped spike the market for recycled building materials. Jean Pogge said, “We work with government, business, and environmental organizations for market-based solutions to sustainability.” Working in all five Great Lakes states, Delta drives initiatives in three areas: to shift society's energy resources from nonrenewables to renewables, to encourage stewardship of ecosystems, and to waste from a liability to an asset.

The Rebuilding Exchange is one of Delta's notable local initiatives. Founded in 2009, the Exchange is a 25,000-foot warehouse where people can go to buy reused materials. Since opening, the warehouse has diverted 9,000 tons of materials into reuse. That's stuff that would have traditionally ended up in landfills.

Mary Trieschmann, the Executive Director of the Exchange, explained, “A variety of people buy materials here. There are DIY'ers [Do It Yourselfers]. For example, someone might be rehabbing their bathroom, and they can find sinks and other fixtures here. We get apartment owners who are redecorating or rehabbing apartments. They can find tubs or flooring that were discontinued. People can find high-quality materials at very reasonable prices.”

Furniture makers also buy stuff at the Exchange. Since old-growth forests are off-limits for logging, recycled lumber is often the best source for high-quality wood. The Exchange has even launched its own line of furniture—RX Made—from reused materials. The warehouse employs 17 people, 15 of whom are full-



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time, and has trained about 80 people in the tricky processes of removing nails and preparing old materials for new life.

Trieschmann added, "We've seen artists who love to work with found materials such as wood and tile. One artist from Wisconsin bought material to create a sculpture for a floating iceberg, as a statement about the dangers of climate

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change." She added, "We've had homeowners say that if they'd only known about our warehouse, they would have donated materials. We have a truck and will pick up what people want to donate." (Trieschmann) Interested people can contact the Exchange through their Web site at www.rebuildingexchange.org.

So, we've looked at the big picture—recycling in Chicago and Cook County. But what about the little picture—you and me? Environmental organizations suggest several ways to recycle more stuff:

- If you're starting a rebuilding or remodeling project, contact the Habitat ReStore, the Rebuilding Exchange, or the Evanston ReBuilding Warehouse to see what materials can be reused.
- Make recycling bins easily available. Paper products definitely have a further use.
- Recycle old technology. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provides guidelines at <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservematerials/ecycling/index.html>
- Be sure to recycle empty ink and toner cartridges. Many retail outlets will take them. And then buy recycled ink and toner cartridges.
- Use rechargeable batteries.

Mike Nowak, who's really passionate about this subject, added one more observation. "At our home," he said, "our ratio of recyclables to trash has grown to be about four to one." It's a great goal, and it's a way to help yourself while you're helping your planet. □