

Voucher Program Makes Recycling Pay

Success could help taxpayers by easing pressure on landfills

By ANDREW TANGEL The News Journal

On Monday, Wilmington begins a recycling program that could change the way the city, and maybe eventually Delaware, dispose of waste.

Under the program - which begins in East Wilmington, Forty Acres and Trolley Square - Philadelphia-based RecycleBank will give residents vouchers based on how many pounds they recycle.

Residents can earn up to \$400 a year in "RecycleBank Dollars," redeemable at local businesses.

"I can't wait until they come Monday," said Cheryl Harris, 52, who lives on Lombard Street in East Wilmington and who has already filled up a recycling bin with saved aluminum cans.

Residents living in the city neighborhoods chosen for the six-month pilot program will be able to dump unsorted recyclables - phone books, milk jugs, tin cans, glass bottles and the like - into the provided bins and wheel them to the curb, paying no monthly fee and earning money-saving coupons for their efforts.

The convenience and the added incentive of the vouchers, city and state officials hope, ultimately could be the key to boosting the state's low recycling rate.

State officials have grappled with ways to divert tons of trash from landfills - particularly the Cherry Island dump in East Wilmington.

More recycling is needed to avoid building another landfill, which would increase costs to taxpayers, said James Short, an environmental program manager for the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control. "If they don't divert now, we're going to pay more for disposal in the future," Short said.

For the city to deem the program cost-effective enough to agree to a five-year contract with RecycleBank, about half the residential garbage now going to landfills needs to be recycled.

Alan Muller, executive director of Green Delaware, called that 50 percent recycling rate an aggressive goal. If the city meets the challenge, it could provide recycling advocates ammunition to argue that the state's 30 percent recycling goal for residential waste is too low. Recently proposed legislation would set the 30 percent goal for 2010; the current rate is about 10 percent.

The Delaware Solid Waste Authority offers a curbside recycling program, but residents have to pay \$6 a month and must sort their recyclables for pickup.

Private haulers that offer curbside recycling can't bring glass to a DSWA recycling facility. Some residents can receive discounts on DSWA recycling fees, or a hauler may offer a reduction in trash-collection fees if a household subscribes for recycling, said DSWA chief operating officer Pat Canzano.

"If a 50 percent recycling rate is achieved with those 8,000 households in Wilmington," Muller said, "that'll be the most successful recycling program that's operated in Delaware."

Recycling advocates say incentives such as RecycleBank's vouchers are the best way to get residents on board.

"If we're going to have curbside recycling in the state of Delaware to any extent at all, it will have to be through a program of this type, because to make it work, it's my opinion that you need incentives to overcome the hesitancy on the part of residents and legislators to" pay for the service, said Paul Wilkinson, chair of the state Recycling Public Advisory Council.

And Wilmington officials hope the voluntary recycling program's convenience will invite participation.

"We hope we have made it as easy possible for them to recycle," said Councilman Charles "Bud" Freel, who helped usher in the program.

Wilmington's program, if successful, could entice neighboring cities to look at RecycleBank, and possibly use a transfer station the company built near the Cherry Island landfill.

Said Short: "I can tell you, all eyes are on Wilmington."

Starts next week

Next week, city garbage trucks retrofitted with RecycleBank equipment will visit the first neighborhoods in the pilot program, accounting for about 2,700 Wilmington residents, and pick up unsorted recyclables from blue bins the company distributed this week. The equipment hoists the recycling bins and measures how much is being recycled, determining how many vouchers residents get.

Recycling runs - on Monday in East Wilmington and Tuesday in Forty Acres and Trolley Square - will replace one of two weekly garbage runs in those areas. Regular trash collection will occur later in the week.

In mid-July, the program will expand to another about 2,700 households in the Little Italy, Hilltop, west Center City and Quaker Hill areas. In mid-August the program is to expand to Browntown, Hedgeville, Triangle and northeast Wilmington.

The city will monitor closely how the pilot program works, including whether the RecycleBank equipment and weighing process slows down workers, increasing payroll costs.

But the city is especially concerned with how much residents recycle. Households would have to recycle 50 percent of waste by the end of the pilot program to offset the cost of paying RecycleBank, said Public Works Commissioner Kash Srinivasan.

"That's what it takes for this program to essentially break even," Srinivasan said, adding: "Recycling is a public good, but we're not willing to pay more for it."

RecycleBank officials are confident they can generate at least a 35 percent recycling rate in six months, said RecycleBank CEO Ron Gonen, "but we're pretty confident we'll get the recycling rate to 50 percent."

Possible five-year contract

If the program succeeds in Wilmington, RecycleBank will expand service to about 27,000 city households under a five-year contract. The city then would begin paying RecycleBank a \$2 monthly fee for each household served - worth about \$648,000 annually.

The city, which in fiscal year 2005 paid about \$1.8 million to the DSWA to dump trash, hopes to save \$100,000 - after paying RecycleBank - if it can divert at least 50 percent of waste from the landfill, according to city estimates. If the city diverts 80 percent, it could save \$578,000 after paying the company.

The city and RecycleBank are committed to making the program work, Srinivasan said.

"But at the end of the day it's about the public and how the public feels about this, and that's going to tell whether it's going to be a success or a failure," he said.

Wilmington residents have overwhelmingly expressed interest in taking part in the program, said John Rago, the city's communications director. Some outside the pilot project's areas have asked to be included, and a few residents have said flatly they won't participate, Rago said.

RecycleBank's vouchers - up to \$25 per month or as a much as \$400 per year - will be redeemable at 40 area businesses.

Harris, who she said was on disability but recently stopped receiving payments, hopes the vouchers will help her make ends meet, helping her buy groceries and spoil her grandchildren.

"It'll really help," said the Wilmington resident, who was "ecstatic" about the program. Once she gets vouchers, said said: "Acme, here we come!"

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Estimated city savings related to recycling rates*

50 percent \$100,000

60 percent \$270,000

70 percent \$425,000

80 percent \$578,000

90 percent \$731,000

100 percent \$884,000

* figures reflect savings to city after paying RecycleBank if program goes citywide.

City of Wilmington

INFORMATION

For more information about the RecycleBank program or issues with service, call (888) 727-2978. The Wilmington mayor's office can be reached at 576-2100.

For more information about where the city's pilot program will take place, check out the city's Web site at www.ci.wilmington.de.us.

RecycleBank's Web site: www.recyclebank.com.

Businesses participating in RecycleBank program

Washington Street Ale House, Wilmington Blue Rocks, Happy Harry's, Grotto Pizza, Iron Hill Brewery & Restaurant, Kahunaville, Minster's Jewelers, Kelly's Logan House, Happy Dog Healthy Dog, Acme, Riverfront Market, Rite Aid, FedEx Kinko's, Bed Bath & Beyond, Regal Cinemas, and Starbucks.

RECYCLING RATES

Delaware 10.4 percent

Pennsylvania 23.8 percent

Maryland 31.4 percent

New Jersey 35.9 percent

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