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BIG BLUE BIN RECYCLING PROGRAM TO SEE CHANGES

As expected, the Big Blue Bin (BBB) recycling program in Mercer and Lawrence counties will see some major changes moving into 2019.

Lawrence-Mercer Recycling/Solid Waste Department Director Jerry Zona noted there are 16 sites consisting of 78 bins in Mercer and Lawrence counties, but as a result of a significant cost increase to maintain the program a decision was made to reduce the number of bins from 78 to 39. He emphasized there are currently no plans to close any sites under the new contract, but the remaining sites will focus solely on collecting cardboard and newspaper while eliminating plastic, metal and glass.

The contract for the program expires December 31. County officials conducted a request for proposals earlier this year and received one bid from Tri-County Industries at approximately \$365 per month per container or \$4,380 per year per container. The counties' current cost is \$2,400 per year per container.

Zona said he had been anticipating increased costs for the Big Blue Bin program and had been brainstorming ideas for worst-case scenarios. Dropping the metal, glass and plastic from the program was determined to be the most logical approach to the challenge. According to Zona, this course of action will result in no increase to the budget and by focusing strictly on papers the counties will not have to pick and choose sites to close.

Megan Gahring, Assistant Director for the Recycling/Solid Waste Department, said counties would have had to eliminate half the sites in order to continue the collection of both material streams. Most sites had four containers: two for paper and two for bottles, cans and jars. The Recycling/Solid Waste Department will begin rolling out the program change before the end of the year with the removal of the metal, glass and plastic bins.

Eliminating glass, metal and plastic from the program also removes the most problematic materials from the program. Gahring said a view into many of the containers will reveal plastic bags, Styrofoam, clamshell food containers, light bulbs, and a many other trash items that don't belong.

Gahring emphasized it will be critical for residents and businesses to adhere to the lists of acceptable items from their recycling haulers. She also noted poor recycling habits were cited as a driving factor behind the ban issued by China. People were placing toys, hoses, windows and a host of other trash items in with their recyclables. The end result is that China was receiving trash along with recyclables. Many people mean well by placing unacceptable items into their recycling bins hoping they will get recycled, but these actions have always been detrimental to recycling. The recycling industry refers to this as "wishcycling."

Global recycling markets are impacting local recycling programs all over the country and the BBB program is another in a long list of casualties. Earlier this year China instituted a policy called National Sword, which bans the import of a variety of scrap and recyclable commodities. As a result, Zona expected residents would see recycling program changes, including changes to their local curbside programs. He noted Erie County recently eliminated glass from their curbside program.

There has been a national trend to eliminate glass from recycling programs over the past several years. Glass has largely been replaced by plastic so there are limited glass recycling options. Additionally, broken glass contaminates the other recycling streams and is expensive to manage. For plastics, there are trends to collect primarily #1 and #2 plastic bottles.

Residents that want to recycle curbside have some options.

Gahring said all residents and businesses in Farrell, Greenville, Grove City, Hermitage and Sharon in Mercer County and Ellwood City, Neshannock, New Castle, New Wilmington, Shenango and Union in Lawrence County are required by state and local laws to recycle "curbside" at their home and place of business. These are referred to as "mandated municipalities" and municipalities are required to provide curbside recycling for their residents, she added. The owners of multi-family apartments and condos are required to provide recycling for their tenants.

Residents in other municipalities that are customers of Tri-County Industries or Valley Waste can recycle by requesting a recycling container through their hauler.