



# PROPER RECYCLING RECYCLING MYTHS

A Guide to doing it right in Lawrence  
and Mercer Counties.

Recycling has evolved, becoming integrated into all aspects of our society and economy and a way of life for most people. Recycling became commonplace almost three decades ago, but many myths and misconceptions about it have persisted through the years.

## **Myth 1: Recycling should be free/My Recyclables are worth something.**

This is a long-standing myth that pre-dates mainstream recycling. Prior to around 1990 organizations and groups could fund raise by collecting items such as glass bottles, newspapers, and cans. These materials had some value for collection at the time.

A major selling point in the early days of recycling was that our municipalities could make enough money from the sale of recyclables to pay for recycling programs. This quickly turned out to not be true, but this information became a persistent myth.

The influx of materials from new recycling programs overwhelmed the fledgling markets. The law of supply and demand activated and increased volumes of materials going through the programs diminished the value of many materials.

Some materials such as aluminium and steel cans retained value which is why many people collect and redeem their own cans. Think about it - if your plastic, paper and other recyclables had any value - wouldn't we see more people collecting and turning them in for money as we do with aluminium cans?

The recyclables in your bin are worthless in their current state. Surprised? read on...

## **Myth 2: My municipality or hauler is making money on my recyclables**

Unless your municipality or hauler owns a material recovery facility, the technical term for a recycling center, they are not making money on your recyclables. There is a significant cost to get a recycling truck and driver to your home and transport your materials to recycling center. Then the trash must be removed, and the remaining recyclables must be sorted, separated by type, and baled by expensive equipment. Only after this process do the materials have value and are ready to be marketed. Think

of recycling as "urban mining". Instead of raw materials being extracted from the earth and refined before they can be used, recycling provides raw materials that need minimal processing. Perhaps the biggest advantage to recycling is the energy saved and consequently the money saved by energy avoidance.

Recycling centers generate a profit but financial success in recycling can be difficult even when recycling markets are good. Aluminium cans and cardboard are materials that usually keep recycling centers' budgets in the black

## **Myth 3: If I put something in my recycling bin they will find a way to recycle it at the recycling center.**

This is known as "wishcycling" and is one of the biggest problems plaguing recycling. Unacceptable items (a nice way of saying "trash") must be removed from the true recyclables and landfilled or incinerated. The average contamination rate is approximately 25% meaning that one in four items placed out for recycling must be removed to be disposed of properly. It is estimated that 20% of the cost of recycling is used to address trash placed in recycling bins.

There are many reasons why people place trash items into recycling bins. Some people have good intentions and believe they are helping by putting these items into their recycling bins. In some situations, education is lacking and people genuinely do not know what to recycle. There are also people who are just cheap and put trash into their recycling bins to avoid paying for proper disposal. This can be a major problem for volume-based programs where people have to buy bags/tags or are only permitted to put out a limited amount of regular trash collection. The result in this situation is people who are properly participating are paying for the people who are not.

Be sure to follow the rules for your program and keep in mind there may be differences between haulers and even neighboring municipalities depending on what recycling center is used. In general, all local programs collect plastic bottles and jugs (if it's not a bottle/jug it's trash!), metal cans, cardboard, magazine, and newspaper.

**If it's not listed as recyclable for your program do not put it in your recycling bin!**

#### **Myth4: Pizza boxes are recyclable.**

You're half right on this one. The lid, as long as it is clean, can be torn off and recycled but the greasy bottom is trash. Grease and food residue is a problem for paper recyclers and can result in entire batches of paper pulp being ruined.

#### **Myth 5: It's plastic so it is recyclable.**

Plastic is one of the most confusing materials when it comes to recycling and is often "Wishcycled": Locally, recycling programs accept plastic bottles and jugs. The key words are "bottles and jugs". That means no clam-shell (food take out) containers, butter tubs, yogurt cups, party cups, toys and so forth. What is a bottle/ jug? Think plastic primarily with screw top lids (sport drinks, condiments, detergent bottles, shampoo, milk, and soda pop) and with the top section being narrower than the bottom.

The recycling symbol containing a number that is found on many plastic items is also misleading. This symbol has nothing to do with recycling; its purpose is to identify the plastic's resin. Promoting plastic recycling by number is still very popular. Most local programs accept #1 and #2 plastic, but, it still has to be a bottle or jug!

Plastic recycling is limited because the chemical make up and physical properties of plastic vary. Plastic may have UV stabilizers, flame retardants, hardeners, or softeners. Different resins melt at different temperatures. Quantity of material is also important. Plastic bottles and jugs make up almost 90% of residential plastic. Plastic is a light material that doesn't compact well. This impacts transportation which relies on weight and quantity to make recycling a particular material cost-effective.

Another challenge to plastic recycling is that some plastic items consist of multiple layers of different plastic. Drink and food pouches contain different layers and it is not uncommon for clam-shell containers to have a lid that is a different plastic resin than the bottom.

Unfortunately, for most plastic, markets do not exist or they are far and few between because of the chemical and physical complexities of plastic.

#### **Myth 6: Recycling programs are all the same.**

Recycling programs can vary significantly. Recycling centers, the proximity to available markets, and ability to transport materials all factor into what can be recycle locally. Residents that live in or near metropolitan areas can usually recycle a broader range of items because of the number of households, and therefore, greater quantities of materials as well as the availability and proximity to manufacturers that can use recycling feed stocks. Residents that move are often surprised by differences in recycling programs between states and even nearby

communities.

#### **Myth 7: It has a recycling symbol on it so I can put it in my recycling bin.**

The recycling symbol is one of the most easily recognizable symbols. It is frequently used indiscriminately on items, which leads to confusion. It may indicate recyclability or that an items contains recycled content. Just because an item has a recycling symbol does not mean that is recyclable in your local program.

Be sure to recycle only what is the list of acceptable materials provided yo you by your municipality or hauler! Don't rely on the recycle symbol.

#### **Myth 8: Recycling will save me money.**

This myth ties together with some of the other myths already discussed. In the early days of recycling, we were told we could save money by recycling. Our expectation is a lower trash/ recycling bill that puts more money into our pockets. Costs have risen over the past decades and where recycling used to be "free" it now has a cost to it.

Recycling does save us money - but not how we think. Recycling saves us money by lowering the cost of the products we buy. Energy, resources, transportation, and processing, all elements of manufacturing, are expensive. Recycling saves significant amounts of these, because mining, extraction, and refining raw materials is expensive. This saves businesses money, which in turn results in lower prices of the items we purchase. We may not directly see the money that we "saved" in our pockets, but it is there!

#### **Myth 9: Plastic bags are recyclable so I can put my recyclables in them.**

Plastic bags are a nightmare at the recycling center and plastic bags that end up there will NOT get recycled. Plastic bags must be ripped open to release their contents and get tangled in the cogs, gears and conveyers of recycling centers. It is not uncommon for recycling centers to shut down multiple times a day to remove them. Plastic bags are an expensive problem for recycling centers.

The good news is that plastic bags are very recyclable, but they have to go to the right place. Many local grocery and department stores accept plastic bags for recycling. Be sure to recycle your plastic bags, just don't put them in your recycle bin!

 [www.mercercountypa.gov/recycling](http://www.mercercountypa.gov/recycling)

[www.lawrencecountypa.gov/recycling](http://www.lawrencecountypa.gov/recycling)

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