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# Elgin residents make huge reduction in 'contaminated' recyclables dumping

By MIKE DANAHEY  
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Workers have to remove items such as coat hangers and plastic bags that clog the machinery Waste Management uses to sort recyclable items. (Waste Management)

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Elgin residents are doing very well when it comes to putting the right things into their recycling bins, but changes in the market for recyclable materials mean people will have to be even more vigilant, officials say.

The contamination rate for recyclables collected in Elgin has dropped from 40 percent two years ago to about 16 percent now, meaning companies that use recyclables to make other items have been rejecting a lot less, said Jennifer Phillips, manager for Elgin 311 Citizen Services.

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But because companies are being a lot more selective in what they accept, the pressure to make sure the right items are going into the curbside bins is only going to increase.

The good news is Elgin is doing better than any other town in Illinois that has a recycling contract with Waste Management, said Vaughn Kuerschner, WM's public sector representative.

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In 2016, Elgin became the first municipality in the Chicago area to join Waste Management's "Recycle Often. Recycle Right." contamination reduction program.

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A comprehensive effort to educate residents on the rights and wrongs of recycling seems to have worked, Elgin Communications Specialist Molly Center said. The city put information out via newsletters, its website and social media while Waste

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Initially drivers tagged bins that included items that had unacceptable recycling items, and then stopped collecting bins if problems were found, Center said. The city's 311 Department has played a key role by answering people's recycling questions, particularly if they don't understand why their recycling was not picked up, she said.

Among the items not to be put in recycle bins are plastic shopping bags, Styrofoam, greasy or cheese-laden pizza boxes, or stained fast food wrappers. Food, wood, syringes, propane tanks, textiles and toys in a bin will result in a driver not emptying a bin.

Wire hangers are not to be included in curbside recycling but dry cleaners will accept them, Kuerschner said. Plastic bags are frequently accepted for recycling at grocery stores as Jewel, he said.

When these items are in among recyclable goods, they get tangled in machinery and force work stoppages, Kuerschner said.

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"Not only does it create significant downtime, but it's also a safety challenge to perform this cleaning," he said.

Elgin works with Ohio-based Simple Recycling to collect some items Waste Management won't take, including shoes, clothing, small appliances and household good, regardless of condition, Center said. Simple Recycling is free for residents to use but orange curbside bags must be ordered online or picked up at city hall before items can be picked up, she said.

Why contamination is more a factor now than before is because of changes being

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recyclables, including some types of plastics, certain textiles and mixed paper, said Tomas Vujovic, Waste Management's area recycling operations director. This year the country announced it would end the import of any solid waste by 2020.

"As China took 50 percent of the world's recyclables, this has been detrimental to the global market. We've had to find new places to take the materials," Vujovic said.

Waste Management is now working with recycling businesses in India, Malaysia and Southeast Asia, and all are requiring a large reduction in contaminated materials, he said.

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Another issue making it tough for companies that collect recyclables is changes in packaging, Vujovic said. Some can contain as many as three or four grades of plastics, which most companies won't accept because they're too difficult to separate, he said.

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The best advice Kuerschner can offer, he said, is to err on the side of caution.

"When in doubt, leave it out," Kuerschner said.

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Wire hangers, plastic bags and textiles are routinely dumped into recycling bins even though they're on the list of items not accepted by companies that accept curbside recycling. When they end up in a sorting machine, they can tangle gears and force mechanical breakdowns. (Waste Management)

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