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# Pilot recycling program expands to more Elgin neighborhoods

By GLORIA CASAS  
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A Waste Management truck picks up garbage and recycling items recently on Spring Street. The company and the city of Elgin are expanding a pilot program to reeducate residents about recycling. (Gloria Casas. / The Courier-News)

Waste Management wants to teach Elginites a simple lesson about recycling:  
"Recycle Often. Recycle Right."

If you don't, your recycling bin could get red-tagged.

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The pilot program known as "Recycle Often. Recycle Right.", or RORR, was created by the city's waste contractor to help communities educate residents and address a growing problem with "contamination" in recycling bins, company officials said.

"The RORR campaign was developed to simplify and decrease confusion about what is and isn't recyclable in curbside recycling programs," said Lisa Disbrow, Waste Management spokeswoman. The goal of the program is to improve recycling and decrease contamination, she said.

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Recycling right can be confusing, Disbrow said. About 26 percent of people recycle items despite being unsure if they are recyclable, she said. "It's no surprise that 16 percent of loads are contaminated," she said. Contamination includes liquids left in bottles, plastic bags and food left in take-out boxes, according to a letter the company sent to residents whose neighborhoods are being added to the pilot program.

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Waste Management launched the pilot program in Elgin at the beginning of the year and recently added more routes, Disbrow said. More neighborhoods will be added as the program progresses, she said. Elgin was chosen because city officials and residents are "forward-thinking, they care about recycling and want to do it right," she said. "The program directly supports the city's sustainability goals, and the city has been an excellent partner in this pilot."

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Elgin is one of two cities in the country in the pilot program, and bringing it to the city has been a collaborative effort, said Molly Center, a multimedia communications specialist and a liaison to the city's Sustainability Commission.

"We are really on board with it," Center said. "We are trying to promote better recycling practices not just in Elgin but outside the area because the recycling industry has changed so much in a few years."

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Eight years ago, the city passed out magnets with information about what can be recycled, but that list has changed, she said. For example, plastic bags are no longer acceptable in recycling bins, she said. Food containers, like Styrofoam cups, are also not allowed in recycling bins, she said. Even if the container has a recycling symbol, it doesn't necessarily mean it is recyclable, Center said.

Bottles and cans cannot have any food or liquid in them. she said. Pizza boxes are

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having food, liquid or grease on it is that it contaminates other items, she said.

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"It spoils the load, and the entire load of recycling ends up in the trash," Center said. "We don't want that to happen. We want to recycle as much as we can. We want to encourage the public on the proper method."

The program's website features simplified rules: Recycle bottles, cans and paper; keep out food and liquid; and don't put plastic bags in recycling bins.

"We are trying to reinforce those three basic guidelines of recycling. If you follow those three rules, everything in your cart should have no issue," Center said.

If residents don't follow those rules, their bin will be red-tagged.

"It's more of an awareness thing. If you get a red tag, hopefully you have the chance to change your behavior," Center said. "The theory is the more educated you are about recycling, the more you will change your behavior."

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A green tag means residents are doing a great job recycling, she said.

"It's been a very positive thing so far," Center said. "The first week a lot of people would get a red tag and the next week it (the number of red tags) was significantly less."

The red tag component has not deterred people from recycling, Disbrow said.

"We have not experienced any decline at all in participation in the recycling

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engagement with Elgin residents wanting to learn more about recycling and recycling the right materials."

*Gloria Casas is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.*

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