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To lure green entrepreneurs, it's best to try acting 'green'

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If you toss a plastic bottle into the trash in North Carolina, you may well be breaking a new state law. Since Thursday, it's been illegal to put plastic bottles into a landfill.

Being a law-abiding sort, Thursday I took a walk around uptown Charlotte to see where I might legally toss a plastic drink bottle - or an aluminum can or even, heaven forfend, recycle a well-read Charlotte Observer.

My purpose, though, was more than just to worry about law-breakers. After all, state officials admit they won't be looking through people's trash. But you can hardly walk into a civic meeting in Charlotte without hearing someone talk about the new "green energy economy" we're trying to encourage here, since that depend-on-banking thing hasn't worked out so well in recent months.

I'm all for building a new, creative-city green-economy of entrepreneurs. But I do note that Charlotte is one of dozens of U.S. metro regions hoping to lure this same industry sector. (And whatever happened to the biotech fad?)

Therefore, I am compelled to point something out.

If we want to attract green energy entrepreneurs and green energy businesses and green innovators, it might work in our favor if Charlotte came across, to the casual visitor, as environmentally minded. Small, symbolic things do indeed convey messages to people.

Earlier this month I was in Toronto, and as I explored downtown I noticed the trash bins on the sidewalks allowed for recycling. Back in my hotel room, I spotted a petite blue recycling bin under the bathroom sink. Hmmmmm.

So when I cruised uptown Charlotte on Thursday, how many spots made it easy to recycle? Hardly any.

I didn't go everywhere, of course, so I may well have missed some. But I saw no recycling bins anywhere on the public sidewalks. I saw none in The Green, none in the Overstreet Mall system, none in the public spaces of the EpiCentre, none in Founders Hall, none in the Atrium - all privately owned.

I found recycling easily available to the public in only three spots. Shout-outs are in order to the Convention Center, the restaurant Blynk Organic inside the 200 South Tryon building and the new Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

At the Ritz, a LEED-certified building, (meaning it met standards for energy efficiency and environmental sensitivity), I stumbled into the grand opening celebration and scored some excellent crab cakes and duck confit, but I didn't see any way to recycle. However, the friendly staff assured me that in the lobby area they whisk plastic bottles off to a recycling bin, and that rooms have recycling bins.

The City of Charlotte is not oblivious to the importance of recycling. It's going to a lot of trouble to change its residential recycling program, in hopes of saving some \$40 million over 10 years. You'll get a large green rollout bin into which you can toss all your recyclables except yard waste. It will be collected every other week.

I asked Gerald Gorbey, deputy director of solid waste services, whether the city has plans to add recycling bins uptown. It doesn't. The main obstacle, he said, was "cost."

I worry about a city that says it would like to lure a creative class of green entrepreneurs but whose government isn't willing to spend the money for what is, in the world of sustainable innovation, low-hanging fruit.

Imagine you're a hot young engineering graduate seeking a site to launch your innovative green energy business. You visit Charlotte and take a stroll down Tryon Street. And you can't find a place to recycle a Coke can?

That will tell you something about Charlotte's environmental awareness.

And I don't think it's the message we really want to be sending.

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