

Area residents seem willing to keep cans, plastic out of landfill

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Given time and the right incentives, recycling can become habit forming. Sometimes it just takes a push, like the law that took effect Oct. 1 banning plastic bottles from landfills.

The people whose job it is to monitor how much we throw away and where it goes say since the highly publicized ban went into effect, North Carolinians are recycling more plastic. Perhaps they're also recycling other waste, too, including aluminum cans – which, by the way, already are banned from landfills – and paper.

The law, which comes with no real punishment for the average tosser of household trash, is still new. Some people may be responding with a short-lived environmental consciousness. But many may use the recycling push to make some permanent changes that can keep a lot of garbage out of our landfills as well as provide a resource for a growing market.

New Hanover County's waste watchers are seeing a promising trend. Over the past couple of years recycling by the public has nearly tripled, even without the impact of the bottle bill. During October they collected about 9 percent more plastic from recycling bins than during the same month last year.

Garbage haulers are making it a little easier by offering recycling services, but they typically come at a higher price than just throwing it all away. Still, for committed recyclers the convenience is preferable to stuffing bags of bottles, cans, newspaper and boxes into the trunk and burning the gas it takes to get it to the nearest recycling station.

In Wilmington, curbside recycling is automatically a part of the garbage collection service. Even there, the city is seeing an increase in requests for household recycling bins and has had to order more to meet the demand. The signs are good.

Once a routine is established, it becomes almost second nature to separate the bottles, cans and paper products from the regular household garbage.

While the public seems agreeable to the concept of recycling if it's made convenient, the means are what's lacking. New Hanover County can't handle much more with the existing facilities. Lynn Bestul, the county's recycling director, says what is needed is a larger, up-to-date facility to process recyclables. That would cost about \$5 million, with most of that going for sophisticated equipment to sort the reusable garbage.

Without one, the county would pay about \$65 a ton to have a private company do the sorting, if the Board of Commissioners opts to keep the county's waste operations in house. The board also is considering proposals from private contractors, at least one of which proposes to expand recycling efforts.

There are advantages and potential problems with a private contract, and the commissioners must weigh those. Keeping the process in house would require long-term investments but would give the public more direct control over prices and services. The commissioners must decide what is best for county residents, not which alternatives are best for private haulers.

Either option should include a strong commitment to reducing the amount of garbage that winds up in the landfill or at the incinerator. The public seems amenable to changing its habits. In this case, it's government's turn to catch up.