

Western Finger Lakes Solid Waste Management Authority

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20 Years of Curbside Recycling

Twenty years ago at the end of a typically cold, snowy February, Wayne County began its curbside recycling program, bringing Blue Boxes to homes throughout the county. It was an unlikely time of year to start a recycling program that depended on people setting out fragile containers on the roadside where they were prone to blow away in lake-effect winds or be hit by prevalent snow plows. Still, the Western Finger Lakes Authority and the collection companies under contract for collection forged ahead. And Wayne County residents responded with enthusiasm. The fervor for recycling continues even now.

Wayne County residents can be very proud of their long-term, consistent recycling. After participating regularly in the program for so many years, they remain faithful. The recycling truck drivers who previously worked in other counties and now collect in Wayne County have commented about the quantity and the quality of materials they collect. One company even had to plan for more and larger trucks to collect the recycling.

“It is not easy to quantify the recycling that has been collected throughout the county for 20 years and put it into terms that any person who fills a couple of Blue Boxes every week can understand,” said Marjorie Torelli, public relations coordinator for the Western Finger Lakes Authority. “How do you picture that much recycling when most people can only relate to a couple of Blue Boxes?” People can relate to the fact that they need far less for trash service once they begin recycling the full list of materials.

Summarizing the amount of materials for the county is more difficult. The tonnage that has been shipped since 2000 from the Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) is over 62,000 tons. Each tractor trailer that leaves the MRF with recyclable materials can hold about 42 tons so that means about 1,500 trucks of recyclable materials have left Wayne County over the last 10 years.

Another way to look at the recycling is to think about the amount that has not gone into local landfills. Landfills often quantify the amount being disposed of in terms of cubic yards. Torelli was able to calculate that around 175,000 cubic yards of materials were diverted from local landfills since 2000.

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Again, it is very difficult to visualize that many trucks or cubic yards. How big is a cubic yard? A square that is 3 feet on each side is a cubic yard, more stuff than would fit comfortably in a family's mini van. Nearly 200,000 cubic yards is a lot of mini vans.

Another way to think of the recycling is to put some numbers to the environmental benefit of collecting all those materials and sending them to make new products. Even figuring for the amount of pollution from the transportation, recycling makes a huge difference in numbers of trees still standing, amounts of pollution not created, and energy not used. The National Recycling Coalition provides a calculator to quantify the benefits of recycling.

Using the figures from recycling that went through the Western Finger Lakes Authority MRF in 2010, the figures are staggering even for only one year. Through the recycling that Wayne County households did, it is the equivalent of removing almost 2,500 cars from the roads as far as reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. In terms of energy savings, recycling saved the equivalent of nearly 1,000 houses. The savings in air and water pollution are over 2,000 tons and 22 tons respectively. Finally, because of newspaper, office paper and cardboard recycled, over 35,000 trees were saved. Since yearly recycling figures have remained generally steady, those figures can be multiplied by 10 to figure the benefits just since 2000 or by 20 for the 20 year benefit.

Recycling systems in Wayne County changed in 2011, but the positive benefits of recycling are still strong. Every ton of materials that are saved from the landfill creates new products that we purchase in stores, saves energy and reduces pollution.

If you have questions about recycling in Wayne County, please contact the Western Finger Lakes Authority, 1.800.724.3867, mtorelli@co.wayne.ny.us.

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