

## EDITORIAL

# Does recycling have a future?

With China buying far less used glass, plastic and paper, processing plants are in crisis. But the problem could be an opportunity for New York.

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

**T**o many Long Islanders, recycling is a moral imperative. It reduces waste, saves space in landfills and conserves natural resources.

But recycling also is a business governed by a simple axiom: If there are no markets, there is no recycling.

In other words, you have every right to feel good about collecting all those bottles, cans and cardboard, but without someone to buy them and reuse them, it means nothing.

That's why recycling is in crisis.

The problem is China, the world's largest market for recyclables. In the past year, it has slashed the amount of recyclables it will accept, mostly by insisting they must be cleaner than before; dirty plastic bottles are worth less than clean ones. Few U.S. recycling plants, including single-stream facilities like the one in Brookhaven Town, can meet China's new standards.

With 40 percent of U.S. and New York recyclables going to China, the fallout came quickly. Many facilities became backed up with recyclables that now had no place to go. Some of the items ended up in landfills, including on Long Island. Hundreds of municipalities nationwide are canceling recycling programs or scaling back what they will accept. And now having to pay to dispose of recyclables instead of getting revenue for them is busting budgets and forcing municipalities to try to renegotiate contracts with carters.

It's a mess. But it's one that can be solved. It requires a mix of short- and long-term solutions. That calls for creativity and urgency. Most critically, it demands a truly regional approach that Long Island to its great discredit has never employed in dealing with the solid waste issues that have long plagued the region.

Fortunately, that seems to be changing. With Long Island's recycling, municipal and environmental leaders in the forefront, the state Department of Environmental Conservation and Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo convened a statewide meeting last week to discuss the crisis. That's a good start. To turn ideas into action, the group must:

- Decide which materials have recycling value and which do not;
- Create markets to dispose of those materials, preferably in a way that would create jobs on Long Island;
- Educate consumers on how better to recycle.



### What is recyclable

Industry experts say that means getting back to basics, and collecting only what can be sold — plastics like water and soda bottles and milk jugs, aluminum and tin cans, newspapers, magazines, clean cardboard. The list can be expanded as events warrant — for example, more plastics could be mar-

ketable if the price of oil, from which plastic is made, spikes.

Glass is another story. When it's broken, it contaminates other recyclables in a bin, and dirt and grime contaminate glass. There is little market for it — most of the glass that enters Brookhaven's single-stream recycling facility is used as cover and drainage layers at the Brookhaven landfill. One idea worth considering is to take glass out of curbside collecting, amend the state's bottle bill to include containers for wines and spirits, and raise the deposit from a nickel to a dime to produce more and cleaner bottle returns. Innovative companies use clean recycled glass in things like insulation, asphalt, abrasives and, ground up as powder, in lubricants, paints, caulks and plastics.

### New markets

They exist in places like Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and India, but some are just developing and others are tightening standards. Creating markets in New York would cut shipping costs and produce jobs. Can our paper recycling industry, devastated two decades ago by China's entry into the market, be brought back with the help of state incentives? With wineries and micro-breweries all over Long Island, can glass bottles be reused to make new ones in a facility here?

Pratt Industries, a huge recycling company based in Georgia, is building a recycling paper mill and a factory to make recycled corrugated boxes in Ohio. The project is expected to create 300 jobs paying \$22 to \$25 an hour, and was helped by a state job-creation tax credit. Our local industrial development agencies could play a role by offering incentives to such a company, instead of poaching from one another. It's time to think big in New York.

### Educating consumers

The state says, recycle right. Which means, don't throw everything in the recycling bin. That slows down recycling facilities because sorters have to pick out the bad stuff. And recyclers get a lot of bad stuff — sneakers, extension cords, rope, anything people think should be recycled.

To play its role, the public needs information. That means a comprehensive set of standards across the region about what should go in the bin and what goes in the garbage, followed by a smart education campaign.

It's important we get this right. Because how we dispose of the stuff we no longer want or need will become an even bigger issue in 2024, when the Brookhaven landfill is slated to close.

Recycling is a step everyone can and often wants to take to save our planet. It can be good business, too. Now we must recycle our assumptions about how it's done.