



Memorandum

TO: TRANSPORTATION AND ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE

FROM: Kerrie Romanow

SUBJECT: RECYCLE PLUS AND RECYCLE RIGHT OUTREACH UPDATE

DATE: January 13, 2021

Approved

Date

1/19/21

RECOMMENDATION

Accept this update on the Recycle Plus residential recycling and solid waste collection program, local state of recycling, and the Recycle Right public outreach campaign.

OUTCOME

Acceptance of this update provides information on recent efforts impacting the Recycle Plus program, public education and outreach efforts, and a recycling market update.

BACKGROUND

On March 2, 2020, Environmental Services Department (ESD) staff provided the Transportation & Environment (T&E) Committee with an update¹ on the Recycle Plus program, recycling markets, and a public outreach plan focused on educating residents on proper recycling. The year following this update has been unprecedented due to the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has impacted solid waste in several ways: solid waste and recycling workers were deemed “essential workers”; stay-at-home orders increased solid waste generation at residences while commercial waste decreased; increased generation of non-recyclable single-use disposables including take-out containers, plastic bags, food packaging, grocery bags, and personal protective equipment; and the City’s and State’s plastic bag bans were temporarily put on hold. Despite these challenges, the Recycle Plus service providers have continued to deliver excellent, uninterrupted service, in contrast to some U.S. cities that scaled back or halted their recycling programs altogether. Recycle Plus service providers continue to adapt to uncertain recycling market

¹ <https://sanjose.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=4328453&GUID=E61CB2BA-B726-4032-BF11-B90CB3D8ED23>

conditions, as well. They continue to maximize landfill diversion and process material to the highest and best use for the available markets, reporting continued sales of most of the traditional, core recyclables, including paper, cardboard, metals, bottles, and cans.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected ESD's public outreach campaigns, as most in-person outreach opportunities (such as community and sporting events) have been cancelled. Responsibilities for solid waste-related outreach were transferred from the Recycle Plus service providers to the City in July 2019, and since then, ESD has provided comprehensive solid waste and recycling outreach with an emphasis on the Recycle Right campaign. The primary goal of the campaign is to reduce contamination in residential recycling by educating residents and City employees on items that do and do not belong in the recycling container. Collecting clean, high quality recyclables help Recycle Plus service providers meet strict contamination limits in international recycling markets and send fewer non-recyclables to the landfill. To support this critical objective, key campaign messages focus on which items are recyclable, and eliminating food and liquids from the recycling stream. Despite the challenges of COVID-19, ESD has continued to provide extensive program outreach, including pivoting to provide new tactics for online public outreach and remote engagement.

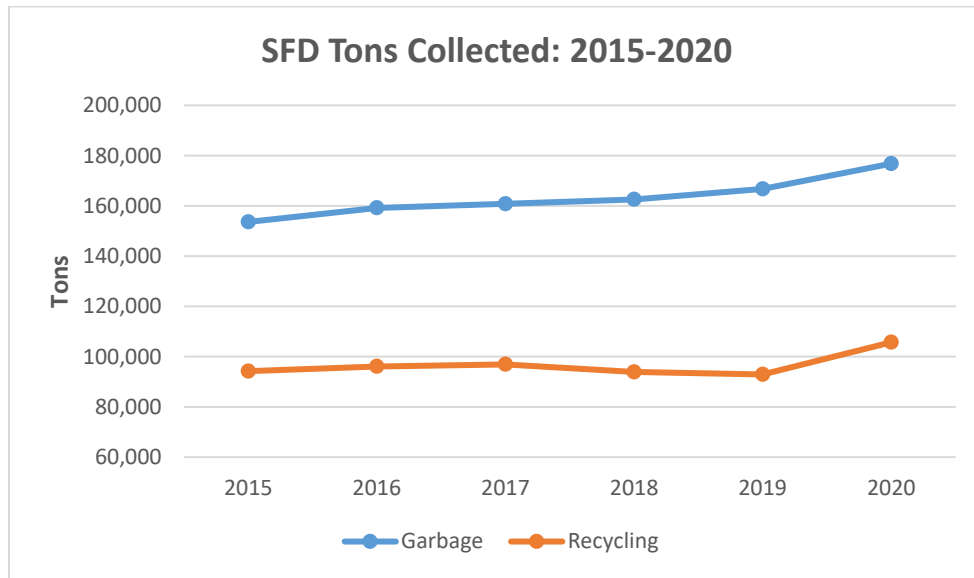
While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Recycle Plus program continue to evolve, it is important to keep the T&E Committee updated on current developments in the program. While this report provides a snapshot of current conditions, ESD will continue to update the Committee and the City Council as new information is made available. Specifically, a study session is contemplated for Spring 2021, which will update City Council on ESD's response to recycling contamination, as well as a report on the City's efforts towards complying to a new organics-related regulation (SB 1383), taking effect January 2022.

ANALYSIS

The City and Recycle Plus service providers continue to implement the suite of Recycle Plus program services, adapt to recycling market conditions, and tailor public outreach to citywide residents from all backgrounds.

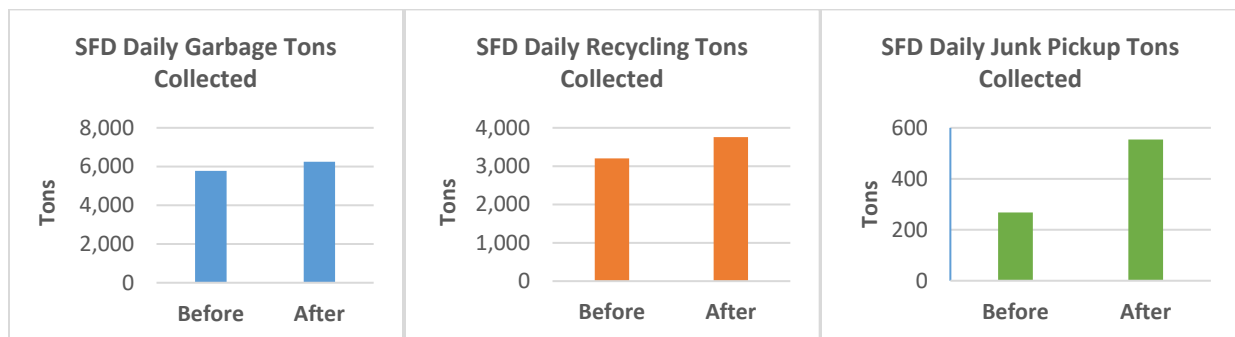
Changing Waste Stream

Prior to 2020, the total amount of Single-Family Dwelling (SFD) garbage material collected curbside by the Recycle Plus haulers had increased steadily each year. Recyclables collected had also increased annually until a decline in 2018. As shown in the graph below, SFD garbage tons had increased (on average) by 2% annually before 2020, largely coinciding with household growth. Recycling tons collected had been somewhat more volatile (even declining in some years), as resident recycling behavior has changed. On average, in the five years prior to 2020, recycling tons decreased by 0.3% annually.

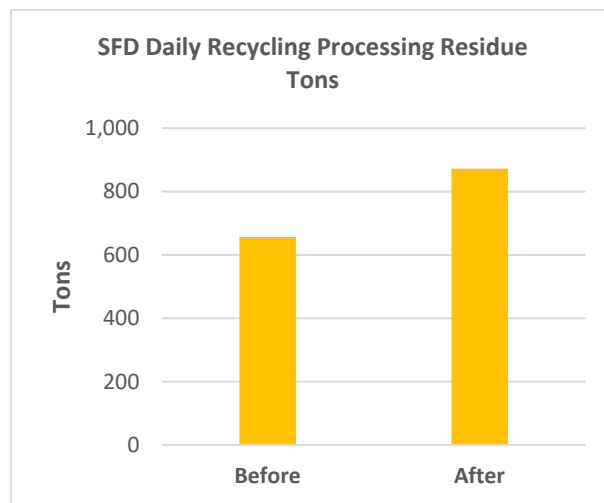


The Recycle Plus waste stream changed dramatically in 2020 due to changing resident behavior in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The graphs below compare daily tons collected before and after the initial March 2020 shelter-in-place order. In the months following shelter-in-place (April to December 2020), garbage tons increased by 8%, as compared to the same time period the year before (April to December 2019). This was largely due to residents generating more waste at home, instead of at the office and at school. Recycling saw an even bigger increase of 17%. Participation in the City’s popular Junk Pickup program has been increasing significantly over the last few years, particularly since offering unlimited free collection of large items beginning in 2017-2018. The increase was even more dramatic after shelter-in place, with daily tons collected increasing by 107%.

SFD Daily Tons Collected Before (April through December 2019) and After (April through December 2020) Initial Shelter-In-Place Order



While garbage tons collected increased in 2020, the City did not see a similar increase in garbage subscription levels. We surmise that too small of a garbage cart can lead to residents placing excess garbage into their recycling carts, which contaminates recyclables that cannot be sold or reused into new products. ESD encourages residents to subscribe to a larger garbage cart (upsizing) when needed and recommends purchasing Extra Garbage Stickers for occasional use when more garbage cart capacity is needed. There was no increase in the number of upsized SFD garbage carts in 2020 as compared to 2019, which likely contributed to more contamination in the recycling carts. This is evidenced by both the higher increase in recycling tons collected as compared to garbage, as well as an increase of 33% in recycling processing residue² being landfilled by the Recycle Plus service providers, shown in the graph below.



As required by Recycle Plus contract terms, a waste consultant obtained by the City is nearly completed with a recycling characterization study that will show the exact levels of recycling contamination in SFD recycling carts. The consultant completed a similar recycling characterization study in 2020 for a nearby jurisdiction shortly before San José's study, and they found that there was significantly more recycling contamination as compared to 2019 levels. The consultant believes that it is the result of the COVID-19 pandemic since a similar study conducted in 2018 for that jurisdiction showed little change from 2018 to 2019. ESD will present final results of the San José recycling characterization study to the City Council at a study session currently targeted for Spring 2021.

National and International Impacts

Mirroring what has been seen in San José, the general trend across the U.S. has been an increase in the tonnages of recyclable material collected and contaminated recyclables in the residential

² Recycling processing residue includes material delivered to the contractor's material recovery facilities for processing, but that didn't meet recycling market specifications after processing and was disposed of at the landfill. Residue may also contain contaminated recyclable material, a small amount of clean recyclable material that escaped sorting, and garbage.

recycling stream. Processing the increased tonnages to meet recycling market specifications has been a challenge for recycling companies, with staff outages due to COVID concerns or outbreaks, increased costs for safety equipment for recycling workers, operational adjustments at processing facilities, fluctuating commodity prices, and the impacts on global shipping as waste bans from China and other Asian countries continue.

In 2020, China stopped accepting plastic scrap and mixed paper from the United States and has committed to banning all grades of recovered paper in 2021. Domestic recycling programs continue to adapt and seek out emerging markets. While China has tightened its standards, other countries (such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and India) have emerged as stronger markets in the global recycling trade. In late 2020, there was some increase in prices for some commodities, including cardboard (in high demand due to more e-commerce purchases and home deliveries), mixed paper, aluminum, and natural High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE). Due to the ongoing challenges and uncertainty of international recycling markets, there is an industry-wide push to continue to develop local recycling markets.

Recycle Right Outreach

ESD continues to provide an expansive Recycle Right public education campaign for San José residents. The campaign includes more than 100 unique tactics to reach San José residents primarily through trilingual digital ads, social media videos, and community engagement activities. With the onset of stay-at-home orders due to COVID-19, the Recycle Right campaign substantially pivoted to increased digital presence including video ads on Hulu and other streaming services, and successfully shifted to live Zoom presentations, focus groups, and online workshops.

ESD's Recycle Right website, SanJoseRecycles.org, is an easy and accessible tool to educate residents about which items are recyclable and share informative recycling content. Website traffic more than doubled in calendar year 2020, from an average of 450 daily users at the beginning of the year to 950 daily users at the end. In total, 276,000 users visited the website throughout the year.

The Recycle Right campaign prioritizes reaching the city's underserved communities, including low-income households and Spanish- and Vietnamese-speaking residents, allocating 37 percent of the FY 20/21 budget to tactics focused on these audiences. These groups are identified and targeted through analysis and mapping of demographic data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Department of Housing and Urban Development. Tactics designed for low-income residents and Spanish and Vietnamese speakers include a direct mail postcard, bus shelter and billboard advertising, billboard ads, supermarket cart ads, laundromat ads, and food pantry meal stickers. To address common barriers for these audiences, these tactics are highly visual, include common sense recycling tips, and do not rely on digital devices or internet connectivity. Messages are developed to resonate with Latino and Vietnamese groups with socio-economic considerations.

For the Spanish-speaking audience in San José, the campaign has 11 targeted tactics, including digital and radio advertising, television commercials, and interviews. ESD's partnership with the

San Jose Earthquakes includes Spanish language tactics focused on the Earthquakes’ key demographic of young, Spanish-speaking males. The 13 different tactics designated for the Vietnamese-speaking audience include digital and newspaper ads, television interviews, radio spots, and short newspaper articles.

Lastly, staff will launch a pilot in February 2021 to test the effectiveness of a recycling cart lid with information on items that should and should not be placed into the recycling cart. The lid label will have visual graphics and trilingual (English, Spanish, and Vietnamese) text. The pilot, which is partially grant-funded, will include about 4,800 households on routes with moderate to high contamination levels, and in areas where English, Spanish, and Vietnamese are the primary languages spoken per the U.S. Census Bureau. The pilot will help measure whether this additional public education piece lowers recycling contamination. Staff anticipates having a completed report of pilot results by the end of this Fiscal Year.

Policy and Regulation

The table below provides a summary of recently enacted legislation pertaining to solid waste. Of these, SB 1383 is by far the most significant and will require operational and administrative changes by the City and its contractors. It will also require interdepartmental coordination for the regulation’s food donation and procurement requirements. ESD will be updating City Council on the impacts of SB 1383 and staff’s planned responses at the Spring 2021 study session.

Regulation	Description	Topic(s)
SB 1383 (Short-Lived Climate Pollutants)	Regulations finalized in November 2020. Reduces methane emissions through organic waste recycling and surplus food recovery. CalRecycle begins implementation on January 1, 2022. ESD staff is working with its service providers and internal and external stakeholders to strategize compliance.	Organics
AB 1583 & AB 2287 (The California Market Development Act)	Reauthorizes existing, and creates new, recycling infrastructure development programs, including sales tax exemptions, low interest loans, and new incentive payment programs. In 2020, CalRecycle developed a commission of private and public sector recyclers to develop strategies for education, promote design for recyclability, and finalize policy recommendations due January 1, 2021. Priority areas will include identifying products widely considered recyclable or compostable in curbside programs.	Recycling Infrastructure and Markets
AB 793 (Mandatory Recycling Content in Plastic Bottles)	Signed into law in September 2020. Establishes recycled content standards for plastic beverage containers subject to the California Refund Value, starting at 15% on January 1, 2022, increasing to 25% in 2025, and to 50% in 2030. The law supports the domestic recycling market by increasing demand for recycled plastic.	Plastics reuse and Recycling Markets

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

Staff will present the results of the SFD curbside recycling study and potential responses to expected recycling contamination results, as well as plans for SB 1383 implementation, at a City Council study session currently targeted for Spring 2021.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

This memorandum will be posted on the agenda for the February 1, 2021 Transportation & Environment Committee meeting.

COORDINATION

This memorandum has been coordinated with the City Attorney's Office.

CEQA

Not a Project, File No. PP17-009, Staff Reports, Assessments, Annual Reports, and Informational Memos that involve no approvals of any City action.

/s/
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Director, Environmental Services

If you have any questions, please contact Valerie Osmond, Deputy Director, Environmental Services Department, (408) 535-8557.