

Joint Senate and Assembly Public Hearing on recycling

On Long Island, the problem with recycling has been a topic of much news. Several Towns have cut back on what they are collecting but not all have. I live in Wyandanch in the Town of Babylon. I'm very aware that in Wyandanch the participation in the Town recycling program is very low. I've asked children I've worked with if they had a recycling bucket at home. They don't all have one and I've even delivered several myself.

One of the big problems with markets for materials collected is contamination. I don't think that here on Long Island we've taken recycling education very seriously—at least not in giving and enforcing specific directions. Other places will leave a note and not pick up what's put out when the directions aren't followed. We don't do that on Long Island—they just pick up anything. Consequently, people don't bother even looking at directions.

Some months ago after reading about how glass is no longer being collected in some areas, I decided to find out what happens to the materials collected for recycling in my Town. Babylon and Huntington continue to collect all the same materials they'd been collecting. So I found out the name of the company that takes the materials from Babylon and after some effort, spoke with someone there. Metals are being recycled. Some of the paper is being recycled. Glass is all trashed and the mixed plastics are baled and sold to some place 'down south.' I suspect that means that the plastics are being exported because there is no market for mixed plastics.

I found a company in Queens that recycles glass and spoke to someone there. The ONLY glass he'll now take is from the return deposit machines because it's the only glass that's clean. He said he used to take the glass from Huntington's drop off center but it's now too contaminated for him. I don't know what he does with green glass as it's mostly imported beer and there's never been a real market for it in this country.

It seems like we need to approach this from two angles—one is to find or create the markets for clean, separated materials in ways that close the loop, and the other is to educate people. Part of that education has to be refusing to pick up contaminated or incorrect materials and leaving a notice informing the resident what was wrong.

I've been working with students in Wyandanch for 17 years, running a program called Rangers of the Earth. We've been collecting white paper for recycling for almost 14 years at the elementary school. The first year we brought the white paper collection to the middle school, we had problems with teachers putting inappropriate things in the recycling bins. One of my 6th graders wrote a letter to one teacher and told her "we are revoking your recycling privileges." It had an immediate effect and over the next couple years, every time she saw me that teacher told me how she was recycling. And that 6th grader is now in college and will be helping me this year in working with the current middle school Earth Rangers to try to cut trash and increase recycling in our community. Part of our plan is to research successful efforts elsewhere and see what will work for us.

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