

Virginia city doubles recycling, saves \$250,000 with cart changes

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By Catherine Kavanaugh

Another city has realized size matters when it comes to recycling carts, especially when paired up with smaller trash carts.

Officials in Colonial Heights, Va., say they made the right choice when they switched to smaller 68-gallon trash carts and gave every household a 96-gallon recycling cart to begin using July 1, 2012, instead of the standard bin.

A year later, the city's 17,000 residents recycled an additional 540 tons of materials, and conversely, sent 506 fewer tons of waste to the landfill. At the same time, participation in curbside recycling doubled to 61% of the estimated 6,700 households.

In addition, Colonial Heights saved \$250,000 in operating costs that now will be spent to restore a unique old baseball stadium, upgrade the public safety communication system and buy new playground equipment. Bigger savings are expected in future years because there won't be any start-up costs.

Residents and businesses also benefited from a recycling rewards program. Every time residents put out their recycling cart, they earn points that can be redeemed for coupons, free appetizers and the like at 32 shops and restaurants. The commercial partners reported an extra \$18,000 in new business.

"It was a perfect storm of things," City Manager Tom Mattis said, adding that it all began at contract renewal time for waste hauling. "We were looking for ways to do more, to do better. We wondered what's possible to save money. That was the core of it early on but in the end that quickly married up with recognizing an opportunity to enhance recycling and be a leader."

Colonial Heights switched to Container First Services for weekly waste pickup and TFC Recycling for collecting recyclables every other week, which meant new cart sizes and colors.

Residents had a few concerns.

"The change to smaller cans was a huge issue before we started," Mattis said. "When you talk about going from 96 gallons to 68 gallons that automatically made people think, 'Well, I fill up that can every week. What will I do with the extra trash?'"

It didn't take long for residents to realize they could do more sorting. A lot more.

"The irony is people are now saying my one 96-gallon recycling cart isn't enough. I'm filling that up," Mattis said.

Residents also have come to terms with an equal point of contention: changing from blue carts that were a nod to the University of Virginia to burgundy and orange, which are the colors of Virginia Tech. Not everyone was a fan of the change but TFC Recycling officials are Hokies and they had chosen the university colors for their company colors.

"Truthfully we got as many comments about that," Mattis said. "It ended up kind of being a running joke with folks that helped us talk about the change in trash carts."

Diehard University of Virginia fans rationalized having burgundy and orange at their curb by saying, "Really, I like putting my trash in that color cart," Mattis added.

A third sticky point with some residents dealt with the rewards program, specifically the barcode scanning system used to issue points on collection days.

"There is a bit of big brother element to that," Mattis said. "People told us you're keeping track of my trash cart and how many times I'm dumping it. But, all in all, it's real popular, especially with seniors. It motivates them. They like getting the coupons."

The statistics for Colonial Heights were presented to city officials by the Central Virginia Waste Management Authority (CVWMA), which is a regional board that implements solid waste and recycling programs for thirteen communities.

"We are very proud of Colonial Heights. City leaders took a very innovative approach to promoting and encouraging recycling," CVWMA Executive Director Kim Hynes said in a statement. "Our collection data for this past year shows that by taking a leadership role in the region, Colonial Heights reduced its waste stream by increasing its recycling efforts at the curb. We hope that others will follow their lead."

In addition to Colonial Heights, the authority includes the cities of Hopewell, Petersburg and Richmond, the town of Ashland, and the counties of Charles City, Chesterfield, Goochland, Hanover, Henrico, New Kent, Powhatan and Prince George.