



PUTTING THE CART BEFORE THE BIN

While not a “solve all,” carts have a proven record of increasing recycling tonnages and reducing long-term costs for municipalities and collectors. Read on to learn the specific practices that help lead to a top-notch transition.

BY CODY MARSHALL

Tall, dark and handsome. Rigid, but oh-so-reliable. We’re talking of course about ... recycling carts.

Okay, they’re actually about 4 feet tall with wheels and a lid. Clearly, they are not the sexiest things in the world, but they are a very important part of our country’s relationship with curbside recycling.

After having conversations with local governments all over the country and interviewing recycling cart manufacturers, The Recycling Partnership has developed a module designed to aid communities as they walk through the process of transitioning from bin- or bag-based curbside collection to a model putting carts front-and-center.

Additionally, The Recycling Partnership will be hosting a workshop to cover the ins and outs of this topic at the upcoming Resource Recycling Conference, to be held in late September in Indianapolis. What follows is a sneak peak at some of the key aspects of cart coordination.

Capacity and convenience

While not a “solve all,” carts are more than just a collection tool. They convey a message about universal recycling. And carts increase tonnages of recyclable material in two ways: by providing extra capacity so homes that are recycling have more

space to put more material and by increasing convenience, thus enticing more homes to participate.

A few examples: A year after transitioning to roll carts, Hillsborough County, Fla. saw an 85 percent increase in recyclables at the curb, going from 32,000 tons annually to 60,000 tons for roughly 260,000 households. Meanwhile, just this year Niagara Falls, N.Y. reported a 10-percentage point increase in its recycling rate eight months after carts rolled out.

In the November 2013 issue of this publication, the State of North Carolina reported on the success of recycling carts. The article (“Cartpe Diem”) stated cart adoption has been the leading factor in the steady growth of recyclable tonnage at the curb, illustrating that between fiscal year 2005-06 and fiscal year 2011-12 the state saw an increase of more than 100,000 tons at the curb. That time period was one in which many areas transitioned to carts in North Carolina.

In addition to tonnage boosts, cart collection opens the door to safety and efficiency in collection. Carts allow for automation, which means fewer staff in or on the truck and less movement out of the cab while on route. Cart-based collection can dramatically decrease workers’ compensation claims just by eliminating the need for employees to bend down to collect bags or bins. Minneapolis, for instance, realized \$250,000 in savings in workers’ compensation claims

within a year. That figure alone could pay for a fully automated truck or 5,000 carts.

The collection method also allows for compaction, keeping trucks on route longer and potentially putting fewer trucks on the road. Orange County, N.C. saved roughly \$100,000 annually with its collection contractor for its urban curbside program by transitioning from dual-stream bin to single-stream bin collection. Then, after transitioning to recycling carts, the community found an additional saving of roughly \$95,000 in collection costs annually.

Cities and counties all over the country know that carts are the best long-term solution for their curbside programs, but funding initial cost is not easy. That's why those of us at The Recycling Partnership have interviewed state and local governments all over the country. We wanted to understand all the moving parts of a recycling cart transition and share the lessons learned. Although each local government manages its program in a unique way, we have identified common themes and best management practices that make transitions to carts possible and productive.

Making the case

There are three sets of individuals public works or solid waste directors need to communicate with for a smooth transition: elected officials, front-line staff and the citizens of the community.

It is crucial to first get buy-in from local managers/administrators and elected officials. Frequently, these decision makers are focused on quality service, health and safety and, of course, the bottom line. The Recycling Partnership has tools to help communities explore the savings aspect (including reduced disposal costs) and helps share examples of cities all over the country finding success. One example is Brick Township, N.J., which reported a \$177,000 savings in landfill tip fees alone.

Engaging elected officials is an ongoing process. Provide each official with talking points that cover the cost savings for the taxpayer and the importance of this infrastructure improvement for the community.

In addition, communities find success when front-line staffers are

SINGLE-STREAM CARTS

MUCH MORE BETTER

INCREASED RECOVERY.

Programs using carts, a common suite of materials, strong outreach and other BMPs can recover 400-450 lbs/hh/yr.

**400-450
LBS PER
HOUSEHOLD
PER YEAR**

MORE CONVENIENCE.

Residents can more easily fit all of their recyclables into one container, then simply roll those items to the curb.

COST SAVINGS.

Budgets benefit from decreased disposal costs, smaller collection crews, more efficiency on the route, and decreased workers' compensation.

Decreased disposal costs

Smaller collection staff

Automation & compaction mean more efficient routes

Flexibility to collect bi-weekly

Decreased workers' compensation claims

Safety = Savings

Source: The Recycling Partnership

prepared to be strong ambassadors of the program. These are the people answering the phone, collecting materials on route, and supervising the process. Here are a few important considerations to keep in mind in this realm:

- Truck drivers (both recycling and garbage) report that citizens will chase after their trucks on a regular basis bringing late set-outs or asking if something is recyclable.
- After a community announces carts are coming, questions about the program will increase exponentially. Communities that equip crews with in-truck brochures help ensure their citizens have pertinent information.
- Customer service reps that have been through a cart transition will tell you that the phone rings off the hook after the initial announcement and the calls only ramp up during delivery. The most common query: “When am I going to get my cart!?” Each person who answers the phones, including staffers at the 311 service, should have access to thorough talking points – this maintains consistency in communication.

A community’s biggest audience will be its citizens. They will be eager to know the following:

- When carts will be delivered
- When collection begins
- What material is accepted
- How to place the cart out for collection

The most important thing to remember is to continue communicating in as many ways as possible. Direct mail opens up the possibility that all residents are informed about the carts before they arrive. Literature accompanying the cart upon delivery is also a must. One of the most popular forms in which that literature comes is in a bag tied to the handle of the cart – it can include a card or magnet with illustrations of accepted materials as well as the notable items to keep out of carts. Calendars outlining the home’s specific schedule should also always be included with the literature upon delivery.

From there, get creative and keep the communication going well after the cart arrives. Albuquerque, N.M., to give one example, found great success

communicating the details of its recycling program through short online videos.

The details of delivery

There are a lot of things to think through ahead of cart delivery, but here are key points that will help with a smooth rollout.

An accurate address list is crucial. It serves two important purposes. First, it identifies how many carts to buy – and then where to deliver them. Local governments all over the country that have been through this transition note the work to build an accurate list is never finished.

Communities that begin scrubbing address lists at least two months before delivery and share that list with the cart delivery company at least six weeks before the rollout date have the best chance at smooth delivery. Cart vendors often help tighten address lists, offering a better understanding of how many carts should be purchased.

It’s also critical to be ready for delivery. Cart vendors will want a secured paved lot to stage carts before delivery. Gravel lots work, but pavement makes loading and unloading much easier.

The Recycling Partnership encourages communities to be prepared with specific directions for the multiple crews that will be distributing carts across a community. Depending on density and size, each crew can deliver between 800 to 1,500 carts per day. These crews will need to know what to do when they encounter common hiccups – when a household rejects a cart, for example, or a house is discovered that may not have made the initial address list. Also, coordinators need to know how many carts to leave for mobile home parks and multi-family properties. Also remember that access codes will be needed for gated communities.

Measure and grow

After all the carts are delivered, communities need to continue measuring and improving. Measure changes in the following areas to gauge success: recycling tonnage, garbage tonnage, contamination rate and set-out rate. Participation rate is great to know too, but unless you have RFID readers in the truck, it is a difficult data point to get. If you do have RFID readers, run reports to find carts that aren’t being used and directly target those homes and areas with literature.

Finally, the most successful communities keep the lines of communication open with their MRFs. It’s true the transition to carts means collection containers will now have lids and drivers might not be touching the container when it dumps, but quality control at the curb will still be possible. Have the drivers randomly tip the lids and look in. Have supervisors run random routes quarterly. When the driver dumps a cart and notices unacceptable material, get out of the truck and leave an “oops” card or note to inform the resident the material was not acceptable.

Communicating quality issues at the curb as soon as carts are rolled out is essential. Local governments all over the country are recognizing the importance of quality material because the success of MRFs leads to the success of community recycling programs.

No silver bullet

It should be noted that the recycling cart will not be the silver bullet or the sole savior for any community program. If a city or county throws a cart at the end of someone’s driveway or tells citizens to simply “call for a cart,” the community program will not realize its full potential. Local governments must communicate and continue to communicate through the life of the program.

The Recycling Partnership, like most of you reading this article, has a mission to increase recycling in this country. Providing carts to every household in the U.S. is one very important part of that solution. No wonder those rolling containers continue to seem so attractive. **RR**

Cody Marshall is the technical assistance director at The Recycling Partnership (formerly the Curbside Value Partnership), a nonprofit group established in 2003 to provide stronger recycling systems nationwide. Cody can be contacted at cmarshall@recyclingpartnership.org. For more information about the entire process of a cart transition, check out our CARTS module located at tools.recyclingpartnership.org.

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