

Where Has All the Trash Gone? Minneapolis Eyes 'Zero Waste'

Maya Rao | May 12, 2014

Imagine a city without garbage.

It's not as crazy as it sounds. Minneapolis officials are taking early steps toward joining -Seattle and San Francisco in becoming "zero waste" cities where just about every scrap of trash is recycled.

A public hearing to ban hard-to-recycle foam takeout containers is scheduled for Monday and City Hall is drafting a plan to pick up food scraps and other organic items from every home by next year, something several metro-area cities already do. And Mayor Betsy Hodges has hired the city's first-ever zero-waste coordinator.

"This is about an aspiration," said Council Member Elizabeth Glidden. "It's an important aspiration, but clearly one that we're only a small part along the road toward."



Dottie Dolezal wraps organic wastes into a newspaper in preparation for disposal.
Photo: Marlin Levison, Star Tribune

Minneapolis has a long way to go to catch up to the West Coast cities that have pioneered zero waste, meaning at least 90 percent of the garbage is recycled, composted or reused. Just 37 percent of its garbage is now recycled and composted, compared with 77 percent in San Francisco and 56 percent in Seattle — cities that require their citizens to do it.

San Francisco also has banned plastic shopping bags, a top contaminant in the -recycling stream. Minneapolis has no proposal to do that yet, though officials are considering how to work with stores to offer more reusable bags. Some council members also want to require more recycling of construction debris as the city faces a development boom.

For now, the city wants to offer more education and outreach on recycling and composting before taking dramatic steps, like making recycling mandatory.

"Maybe down the line we need to get to some level like San Francisco ... for right now the framework is not there," said David Herberholz, Minneapolis' director of solid waste and recycling.

Starting early: Packaging

Advocates of zero waste say the concept goes much further than simply driving people to recycle more. Zero waste, they say, requires companies to produce goods that are reusable and durable and use more recyclable packaging, as well as less -packaging in general.

The movement started in recent decades when recycling professionals "realistically saw that recycling really wasn't going to get us what we were trying to achieve," said Susan Hubbard, a former CEO of Eureka Recycling who now runs a consulting firm called Nothing Left to Waste. "We really needed -people to look at it from the whole -picture."

Minneapolis Council Member Andrew Johnson has seized on that idea. He wants to amend a long-standing ordinance to require restaurants to only serve takeout food in "environmentally acceptable" containers. That excludes what's commonly known as Styrofoam and other materials that are difficult to recycle. Dozens of American cities have passed bans on foam containers, and -McDonald's announced last year that it would replace foam coffee cups with paper

ones.

While representatives of the packaging and plastics industries are expected to show up at Monday's hearing to argue against the ordinance, the Minnesota Restaurant Association says it is unlikely to oppose the move, though some members have concerns about the Jan. 1 start date.

Johnson, a former systems engineer at Target, is also drafting a letter to the retail giant calling for it to work more with vendors to decrease waste sent to landfills and reduce packaging.

"If we want to think really big ... we need to have our corporate leaders be part of this, and ultimately Target has the most influence in our city and our state to drive national results in reducing waste," said Johnson.

Environmental nonprofit **As You Sow** has pushed General Mills and other large companies to generate less waste, recently filing a shareholder resolution calling for Golden Valley-based General Mills to stop using unrecyclable plastic packaging for Nature Valley granola bars, Betty Crocker cookie mixes and other goods.

While the organization has promoted fees on corporations to cover the cost of recycling — a system already common in Europe and Canada — **As You Sow's** senior vice president, Conrad MacKerron, said cities also have a role.

"They have to motivate their citizens, they have to educate them," he said. "They're in a good role to do that by being able to communicate with them locally to change their behavior."

Beyond 'zero heroes'

Minneapolis already encourages people to be "zero heroes," buying products with less packaging, bringing their own coffee mug to work and vacuuming the coils under their refrigerator every six months to make them more efficient.

Days into the job, new mayoral aide Stephanie Zawistowski offered few details about what Minneapolis' zero-waste plan would look like but said that communication and education is important when it comes to having people using recycling and other programs day to day.

"You just want to make it easy for people to participate in," said Zawistowski, who comes to the job after doing environmental management work for Best Buy.

For instance, Minneapolis' recycling rate jumped after the city introduced single-sort recycling last year, allowing people to dump all their materials in one bin instead of separating them.

The city will review the numbers to figure out which neighborhoods need more outreach, and is looking at how language barriers among immigrants may lead to lower recycling rates in some areas. Officials are considering explaining instructions in more pictures than print, as well as translating more into Somali, Hmong and Spanish.

San Francisco, a role model

At a zero waste forum in March, San Francisco waste coordinator Julie Bryant told the crowd that her city's accomplishments were possible for Minneapolis, too.

"We believe any city can do what San Francisco has done," she said.

But Minneapolis and San Francisco have major differences in how they handle waste. While Minneapolis' waste hauling services mainly cover residential homes, San Francisco has control over commercial garbage, too. And the city benefited from aggressive state laws requiring municipalities to divert much of their waste from landfills or face steep fines.

A bill in the Minnesota Legislature would help Minneapolis' cause if passed, granting \$7 million more in recycling funding for counties and raising recycling in the metro from 50 to 75 percent of all waste.

Composting: 'Make it easy'

Hennepin County is pushing the city to adopt a curbside composting plan for organics, which make up about one-third of local waste, after dropping a bid to expand capacity at the trash incinerator. Other cities in the county already have organics recycling, including St. Louis Park, Wayzata, Medina, Loretto, Maple Plain and Medicine Lake.

If curbside composting is implemented citywide, all Minneapolis residents could start putting out their banana peels, pizza boxes, coffee filters, Q-Tips and other organic materials for curbside pickup. A consultant's report last fall suggested the city consider making it mandatory.

Pilot projects already have taken place in eight Minneapolis neighborhoods. Yet even in affluent Linden Hills, only a little more than half of citizens fill their green carts, and city leaders are now studying how to come up with a plan that will build wider participation.

Linden Hills resident -Dottie Dolezal cuts off the top of her milk jug and keeps it under her sink for when she disposes of apple cores and carrot peelings. When it fills up, she wraps the scraps in newspaper and puts them in the green cart by her back door. She has encouraged neighbors to compost, too, while talking over the fence, running into them at block parties and hosting an ice cream social in her home.

"You just have to find ways to make it easy," she said. "If it's a lot of work, people just aren't going to take the time."