

Changes to Recycling

“Houston, We’ve had a problem here.”

-Crew of the Apollo 13

For years, people have been advocating the benefits of recycling. *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle*. Who didn’t see a bumper sticker or ad with that slogan on it? And recycling was, is, and will be critical to staving off a waste crisis. But (and I’ve always been told to ignore everything that comes before the “but”), we stink at recycling. Because of that, recycling is about to change. And, despite what you may have seen in the news recently, it is not just changing in the South Hills. The entire nation has work to do. But, before we get into those changes, I’d like to explain why things must change.

“I like to take out the recycling because I actually feel like I'm doing something.”

-Congressman Mike Quigley

So many of us have become “aspirational recyclers.” Rather than take a chance at throwing away something that could possibly be recycled, we have thrown everything possible into the recycling bin...and we have ruined recycling. Raise your hand if you have ever thrown a pizza box in your recycling bin. (Okay, don’t actually raise your hand, but look out your window to see if your neighbor did.) This is one of many ways we recycle poorly. Pizza boxes are contaminated with oils, primarily from grease and cheese, and those oils cling to paper fibers. The paper recycling process uses water to separate the fibers, but the oils from a single pizza box can contaminate an entire batch of reusable paper products. This is one of the easier items. Locally, we have had everything from garden hoses and stringed-lights to carburetors found in our recycling. At this point, you’re probably thinking, “This hasn’t been a problem for the past decade, so why is it a problem now?”

“Even when we think or talk about recycling, lots of recyclable stuff ends up getting incinerated or in landfills and leaving many municipalities, diversion rates - they leave much to be recycled. And where is this waste handled? Usually in poor communities.”

-Majora Carter

I am sure that by now, everyone has heard about the trade imbalance between the United States and China. What you probably have not heard is how that trade imbalance affected the waste and recycling industries. For years, the United States has received massive amounts of goods produced in China, which have been shipped across the Pacific Ocean in cargo containers, but the United States did not have an equal amount of goods to ship back. At some point, an entrepreneur took notice and had the bright idea to send American recycling overseas. Chinese plants needed raw materials to continue producing knick-knacks and the United States wanted to do its part for the environment. Win-win, right? Wrong. This system took advantage of cheap labor and lax environmental regulations to process our aspirational recycling. Our waste was hand-sorted to remove all “contaminants” – non-recyclable material – and then sent to either a recycling facility or a Chinese landfill.

“There is no such thing as ‘away’. When we throw anything away it must go somewhere.”

– Annie Leonard

For us, away has mostly been China. However, the Chinese government has shaken the world’s recycling market by finally demanding recycling shipments only contain recycling. China’s “National Sword 2017” policy was the most recent, and dramatic, policy change to hit the recycling industry. After having already limited shipments to no more than five percent (5%) contamination, the policy dropped that number down to one, before finally going down to 0.5%. That strict policy affected the entire waste-stream. As our current waste and recycling contract is set to expire at the end of the year, we are about to be affected as well.

“What's happened has happened, so what can we do to make it better for tomorrow and the day after? That's why we're here.”

- Ian Botham

There are a number of changes to make, but they all begin with education. This article serves as part of the initial effort to help Dormont recycle better, but we will have more material leading up to 2019 and throughout the new year. Simply put, there are fewer items that will be accepted in your recycling bin, and failure to recycle well could mean fines for Dormont from the hauler.

So, what *can* be recycled? Clean paper and cardboard products (try cutting the lid off your pizza box before it gets contaminated), plastics 1 & 2 only, and metal cans.

Additionally, under the new waste and recycling contract, Dormont will go back to bi-weekly recycling. As there are fewer items that will be accepted and we were already not producing enough recycling to necessitate weekly collection, this was a decision that is both good for the environment (fewer trips by highly inefficient trucks) and good for Dormont pocketbooks (expect a reduction of about \$20 on next year’s solid waste bill).

“We are living on this planet as if we had another one to go to.”

– Terry Swearingen

I know that change can be difficult, but I am positive that Dormont can rise to the occasion and recycle well, if not for ourselves, for our future.

My sincerest thanks,

Ben

Ben Estell, Borough Manager