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Athens-Hocking Recycling Centers announces plastics change

By SAMANTHA TAYLOR Messenger Staff Journalist Jun 20, 2018



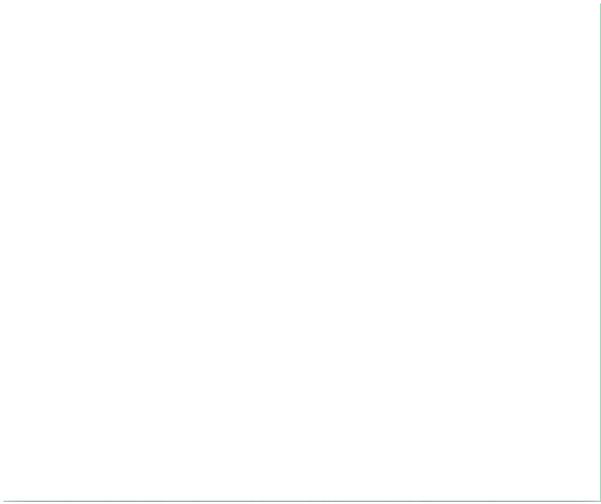
An Athens Kroger employee helps costumers bag their items in 2016.

Messenger photo by John Halley

Note: This story appears in the Wednesday, June 20 newspaper on Page A1.

Starting July 1, the Athens-Hocking Recycling Centers will no longer accept grocery bags, sandwich bags and other items made from film plastics.

In late May, AHRC Executive Director Bruce Underwood told Athens City Council that the recycling center no longer had an outlet for film plastics. He cited contamination of those particular plastic materials as a major factor.



Underwood told The Messenger that most refuse facilities don't accept film plastics because they are labor intensive, can clog machinery and are low in value — but AHRC was different. Underwood said the center's previous film plastics buyer no longer purchases such items from AHRC because other materials — often unclean — contaminate film plastics, making their value drop.

"You can't keep those bags clean enough," he said.

Underwood is working with the city to get the word out about the recycling center no longer accepting film plastics that will include exactly what materials to which that would apply.

Going forward, Underwood said the best alternative is for people to avoid using them entirely. He noted another option is to take back plastic grocery bags to the stores where they got them, like Kroger, which collects its used, branded plastic bags.

In 2016, Athens City Council had considered legislation that would have implemented a 10-cent fee on all single-use plastic and paper bags acquired at retailers in the city limits. The legislation was meant to incentivize consumers to use reusable bags and lessen bag waste. It was eventually tabled following opposition from city residents and business owners.

Going forward, Ohio city governments may not be able to consider proposals such as taxing single-use plastic bags if a new piece of state legislation makes it through.

Last October, Ohio Sen. Bill Coley (R-West Chester) introduced Senate Bill 210, a piece of legislation that would prohibit municipalities from imposing a tax, fee, assessment or other charge on the sale or use of "auxiliary containers" such as plastic or paper bags. That legislation

proposal was sent to the Ohio Senate's Health, Human Services and Medicaid Committee, where it still remains.

Council member Chris Fahl was critical of that proposal.

"There's a problem with plastic bags and they are difficult to recycle, but at the same time the (state) legislature is imposing on the cities and communities the ability for the community to be able to do something about it, such as a plastic bag fee or something," she said. "So there is the state legislature who is saying, 'Well you can't do anything,' and here's real life saying, 'Well we need to reduce those because they're not recyclable.'"

Contamination of materials through mixed (single-stream) recycling has decreased the value of other items besides film plastics, according to Roger Bails, the operating coordinator for the Athens Hocking Solid Waste District.

"Now that we're in single-stream, our materials are not as high on the recycling pyramid," he told Council at its June 11 meeting. "They're not as clean, they're not as pure as they were when in the old days you sorted at the curb."

Both Underwood and Bails have attended recent council meetings due to City Council's considering AHSWD's new management plan and extending AHRC's contract with the city. Council approved the district's management plan during its June 11 meeting and the recycling center's contract extension on Monday.

Last week, Bails told Council that he wasn't sure if AHSWD would be able to accept film plastics in its recycling efforts. The district's plan includes recycling newspapers, magazines, cardboard, office paper, steel and aluminum cans, glass and plastics (not including film plastics).

The Messenger previously reported that another issue hurting the American recycling market is China no longer accepting imports of materials such as mixed paper and post-consumer plastics. (China is a major processor of the world's paper, metal and plastic waste.)

On America's coastlines, "there's materials that are backing up on the docks that they're not able to ship," Bail said.

"Currently, we're still able to move the materials that I have listed in the solid waste plan," he added.

Bail noted going back to sorting recyclable materials again would be difficult.

"I'd rather not go down that road," he said. "I'm not saying it's impossible, but it would be really difficult."

Mayor Steve Patterson said that "from an environmental standpoint," single-stream recycling has reduced the city's carbon footprint, explaining that it prevents the idle time recycling crews used to spend keeping materials separate at the curb when the city was still on a sorted recycling system. Bails agreed, noting that the district doesn't have to send out as many trucks as before.

"It's much more efficient, lot less of a footprint as far as carbon," he said. "But there are some drawbacks to it."

Though AHRC will no longer accept film plastics, Underwood noted that those materials are just a small fraction of what the recycling center still processes and emphasized that recycling is still something that consumers in the county should do.

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