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## Recycling carries on despite declining value of materials

By SAMANTHA TAYLOR Messenger Staff Journalist Jun 1, 2018 Updated Jun 2, 2018



West Elementary students recycle materials in preparation for Recycling Day 2014.

Messenger photo by John Halley

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Since last year, recycling has become more of an expenditure than a source of revenue in the United States, yet local recycling operations are still determined — and in some cases required — to continue providing those services anyway.

At the last two Athens City Council meetings, officials from Athens-Hocking Recycling Centers (AHRC) and the Athens Hocking Solid Waste District (AHSWD) have discussed those financial woes with council members.

Council is considering a one-year extension of its contract with AHRC, which if approved would increase the contract's cost for the city by more than \$30,000 — from approximately \$80,000 to \$111,000. Council is also considering approving AHSWD's new solid waste management plan.

AHRC Executive Director Bruce Underwood told council members Tuesday the contract's cost increase is mostly due to impacts the global market is having on the recycling industry nationwide.

"There are some other factors that are leading to some of the cost increases for the contract, but the decrease in the value of commodities has effectively reduced our revenue from those materials by 50 percent in the last eight months," Underwood said. "So it's pretty significant for us, and not just for us but (for) recycling centers across the country."

The value of some recyclable items have changed more drastically than others, he said, with glass being one of them. Recycling glass used to make the recycling center money, but now it costs the center \$25 per ton to process. Other factors that contribute to the expense of recycling glass include its heaviness and transporting it to Dayton, where Ohio's only glass recycling facility is located.

AHRC Board President Ed Newman said recycling glass at that price still costs less than what it would to send glass to a landfill (about \$41 per ton).

Councilman Peter Kotses mentioned he was concerned about the future of recycling plastics in the region due to other countries currently not accepting plastics and other recyclables.

Last summer, it was announced that China (a major processor of the world's paper, metal and plastic waste) would no longer take imports of materials such as mixed paper and post-consumer plastics. In May, it was announced that Vietnam would temporarily stop accepting scrap plastic imports between June 25 and Oct. 15 due to overcapacity of those materials.

"A lot of our materials were being shipped across the sea to other markets and those markets have changed a little bit," said Roger Bail, operations coordinator for AHSWD, during the May 21 council meeting. "From the States' side we have not always used some of the stuff as well here at our homeland, because we found it was easier to send where there was lower-cost labor markets to handle or deal with it."

Underwood said AHRC would "do our best to continue recycling rigid plastics — yogurt cups and water bottles and things like that."

Film plastics such as grocery bags are a different story. Underwood said AHRC has "failed to secure an outlet" for the film plastics it accepts. Currently the recycling center is contractually obligated to take film plastics, "however, in reality it's going to the landfill because we cannot find a home for it."

Though there is a limited market for film plastics out there, Underwood said contamination of the film plastics AHRC receives prevents the center from tapping into that market.

"It has to be so much cleaner than it currently is," he said. He later explained best recycling practices include thoroughly rinsing materials before recycling them and packing materials loosely rather than compactly into containers.

Underwood said AHRC will be starting an informational campaign to warn people about the center not taking film plastics and also how to avoid using them.

According to Underwood, the recycling center could lose its ability to recycle other materials further down the road if there isn't an outlet for them.

The contract's cost increase does not account for a potential new composting service the center may provide the city in the next few years, or for the compost pilot program that is about to start this summer. Underwood said that service would be under a separate contract.

Council member Chris Fahl pointed out that recycling these materials still makes sense because it would cost money, possibly more, to process waste regardless of whether it's being recycled or going to a landfill.

"I do not want to hear from people when they say, 'well we need just to stop the recycling system and just throw away everything'," she said. "That would increase our costs big time. Refuse and tipping fees are only going to go up."

Bail explained the global markets are "always in flux" and are often unreliable, noting how he went through a "slow time" back 2008 and 2009 during which he laid off 11 people and closed the Hocking County Recycling Center (the center is still closed and serves as a drop-off location).

"Things will get better," he said, adding that the markets have stopped dropping.

Regardless of whether or not there's a market for recycling, the district is still required to provide recycling services to its residents.

“The EPA is really not interested in whether they’re making a profit, they mandate that we do recycling and they base it on access,” Bail said.

The district is required to make recycling accessible to residents and to commit to recycling four materials regardless of the markets, he explained. Those four materials include old corrugated cardboard, universal beverage cans (aluminum cans), steel or tin cans and paper fiber (newspaper, office paper).

“I don’t want to drop the other stuff we’re doing,” he said, “and we’re going to continue to do it until I don’t have any money left.”

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