

# Coalition fights Ballard plan to shake up curbside recycling

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Recycling for Indianapolis households could mean throwing everything in one curbside bin, under a proposal soon to be announced by Mayor Greg Ballard and incinerator operator Covanta.

Covanta is proposing to build a \$40 million "material recovery facility" that would handle all the city's waste—garbage and recyclables alike. As part of a new contract with the city, residents would be encouraged to throw all their waste into one bin. While households could continue contracting for traditional curbside recycling, it wouldn't be the city's main means of recycling.

Ballard's office says the Covanta plan will dramatically boost recycling at no cost to residents, but commodity industry leaders say there are hidden impacts to their businesses and the economy. They've asked Ballard to hit the pause button on the deal and consider alternatives.

"There are new resources available that can very likely provide a tax-neutral solution that's a much more effective solution," said Carey Hamilton, executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition.

Ballard spokesman Marc Lotter confirmed that the mayor is considering a new program.

"What we're talking about here has the potential to greatly increase the amount of recycling in the city," Lotter said. "They want to continue doing what we're doing, which has gotten us a whole whopping 10 percent of participation in 40 years of effort."

Currently, households can pay a separate fee for curbside recycling, or they can haul the stuff themselves to free drop-off points. Historically, Indianapolis hasn't recycled much, but total tonnage appears to be increasing. In 2009, the city generated 7,279 tons of recyclables from curbside and free bins. Currently, it's about 13,000 tons.

Covanta says it can boost total tonnage by five times, but Hamilton thinks the city could do even better under a traditional program with free curbside bins. The coalition hasn't proposed a specific program, but Hamilton said she encouraged the Ballard administration to take advantage of funding from state and private-sector sources.

The coalition sent Ballard a letter in April asking him to put Covanta's proposal on hold for six months and consider alternatives. More recently, on June 2, the CEO of Pratt Industries Inc., Brian McPheely, weighed in with his own letter.

Commodity industries oppose Covanta's proposal because they say mixing garbage with recyclables lowers the amount of waste that can be recycled, as well as the quality of that material, which is vital to their businesses.

"One of the most critical issues facing the 100 percent recycled paper industry is the availability of clean, economically viable fiber for domestic producers," McPheely said in his letter.

Pratt, based in Conyers, Ga., is building a \$260 million, 250,000 square-foot paper recycling plant next to its cardboard box plant in Valparaiso, which employs almost 350 people, McPheely said in the letter, which he wrote on behalf of his company and the national Paper Recycling Coalition.

Indiana glass recyclers are also alarmed because Covanta's system would not recover any glass, said Hamilton, who was briefed on the Covanta proposal.

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Covanta currently receives at its south-side incinerator any city waste that isn't recycled, under a 10-year contract signed in 2008. Covanta sells energy from the incinerator to Citizens to help power the downtown steam loop.

The new "material recovery facility," or MRF, would pluck out 80 percent to 90 percent of paper, plastics, cardboard and metal, Covanta spokesman James Regan said. It would not recover glass, but the company, based in Morristown, N.J., could recycle glass in the future, he said.

Despite industry objections, Regan said, "We've met with a number of recycling partners, and all have confirmed a market for recycling materials," he said.

The recycling industry refers to the type of system that Covanta is proposing as a "dirty" MRF. Covanta calls it "advanced recycling."

Regan said the MRF relies on new sensor-based technology to recover recyclables, rather than people picking over trash. Covanta has not built such a system elsewhere in the United States, he said.

While Covanta is promising to dramatically increase recycling, the recycling coalition thinks Indianapolis can do even better, Hamilton said. In its letter to the mayor, the coalition alleges that Covanta's best-possible recycling rate would be 24 percent.

The coalition letter also raised the specter that existing recycling programs at Lucas Oil Stadium, schools and offices would suffer "once residents are told recyclables should be combined with trash."

Regan said households would continue to have the option to pay a separate fee to Republic Services for traditional recycling.

Regan said Covanta hopes to make an announcement about its proposal in the next week or so.

Lotter confirmed that a contract is being finalized through the Department of Public Works.

That has City-County Council Vice President John Barth alarmed. He plans to have the council's public policy committee take up a discussion about recycling.

"We need to have a thoughtful public process," he said.

With Covanta's contract ending in 2018, he said, "We have a leveraged opportunity to negotiate the best possible deal for the city."

The Covanta deal would not require the council's approval.

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McLaughlin covered business for daily newspapers in Massachusetts and Florida before joining IBJ in 2008. A native of the St. Louis area, she appreciates Indiana's Midwestern hospitality. Given her beats, you may find her taking in art, chronicling the death of a factory town or touring

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**Dackelmommy** • 2 years ago

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For those who are concerned about the general bins for trash and recyclable items being available, please know that this is very common in Southern California, and we have NO fees. Your change would not be unusual.

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**NB** • 2 years ago

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This sounds like flow control to me. The City shouldn't be dictating where to dump our garbage and/or recyclables and if they are going to dictate this it should be done through an open contract environment. If the City of Indianapolis keeps negotiating no-bid contracts they are going to drive competition away resulting in higher prices for the residents of Indianapolis. The waste industry has undergone a lot of consolidation in the past decade. Currently there are only 4 haulers (excluding the DPW) and 3 (relatively close) disposal facilities that can service the City. Five years from now a lot of that can change. What happens if there's only one vendor left? The City could be held over a barrel by one of these vendors. I believe that it is the duty of the City to promote a healthy competitive business environment or it might otherwise strangle itself out. Let the IRC put together a proposal! If the City wants to save money it should look at it's own DPW budget and perhaps privatize that portion of trash hauling too. All options should be on the table to maximize recycling (more local jobs) and to create and maintain a healthy open bidding environment.

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**GeorgeP** • 2 years ago

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Carmel includes a curbside recycling container in its trash pickup bid and the homeowner pays no additional cost. The percent recycling is several times what Indianapolis is experiencing. As usual, Indianapolis should look to Carmel and follow their leadership.

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**Mike** → **GeorgeP** • 2 years ago

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Hahaha...follow Carmel's lead? Are you serious? Carmel is the king of wasteful spending, we don't need any more of that nonsense in Indy. Hahaha! Plus Carmel is a little suburb, not a large city...you can't compare the two. I love how Carmel thinks it's a city and not a collection of sub-divisions.

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**K** • 2 years ago

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In 2011 the City of Fort Wayne created a one-cart recycling program that made recycling more convenient and economical for the community. It has been hugely successful! We are recycling more material than ever before and receiving a revenue share from the recyclables that are sold on the market. Our community now has a better program for less cost. Our participation rates have

the market. Our community now has a better program for less cost. Our participation rates have jumped from 33% to 80%. I have to believe that Indy can create something just as successful. The solid waste industry is BIG business and very complex. All options should be carefully studied and considered before making any decisions.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Scott** • 2 years ago



Russ, just calling foul on a couple of your comments. First, Republic charges about \$6 a month. We pay about \$18 a quarter, not \$50 a month. Second, you can't buy a trashcan for \$10. Maybe one you can put under a desk or in your bathroom...maybe...but not a curbside trashcan. If you want to make arguments, at least support them with truthful examples.

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**Russ** • 2 years ago



Republic sent their cash vampires through our neighborhood a couple of years back and provided "free" recycling containers with the fine print that we would pay \$50/month for recycling service. What a load of crap. I sent mine away the following week. I'm sure there are some in the neighborhood who are paying for a service they don't use because they are putting regular waste in the "free" bin. We have an elementary school 2 minutes from the house that collects recyclables, so we just drop it off there. I bought my own containers at the store for less than \$10. Problem solved without the government telling me what to do or digging into my wallet through the guise of "privatization".

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**Urban Dweller** • 2 years ago



Slow down Ballard. Let's not do another rush job like the parking meter lease. Moved here from Nashville TN in 2003 and they were doing 100% curbside recycle then. ASK QUESTIONS and not from the proposed vendor(s).

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**Steve** • 2 years ago



What I don't like about the current program is that we pay Republic for our recycling, and our trash that we put out has gone from 3-4 containers per week to one, and that container is usually less than half full. So while our recycling fee is added to our costs, I see absolutely no savings whatsoever from putting out about 25% of the trash that we used to put out....doesn't seem fair.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Hodog** • 2 years ago



Since all trash is burned in an environmentally compliant incinerator and converted into energy, we are already recycling our trash. Sorting out specific recyclables is even more efficient, especially when done at the end of the process rather than have multiple tubs or multiple trucks picking up trash. Sometimes we waste more energy recycling than we save. This sounds like a good proposal.

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**Connie** → Hodog • 2 years ago



Too many red flags should be flying over this proposal. Red flag number 1 -Recyclers are working very hard to redefine what is considered "trash" and we have strong leaders in our



working very hard to redefine what is considered trash and we have strong leaders in our own state that exhibit real progress in recycling. Red Flag number 2: Turning a major portion of this city's trash to energy is a huge waste of many resources already being siphoned from the waste streams Red Flag number 3: Aren't we suppose to be promoting Indianapolis as a community who's main focus on job creation is to attract high tech jobs? We may be missing a step by burning recyclable resources when renewable energy resources are struggling to get off the ground. Red Flag number 4: Any contract negotiated without council approval is taking advantage of that city in ways that need to be looked at closer before signing. These are only a few red flag of the many that need to be considered. But these should be enough to make anyone looking for a sustainable solution to our city's waste management to stop and ask more questions, many more questions.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Leslie Flowers (2)** • 2 years ago



I completely agree with Carey Hamilton's insistence that we consider all options before making such a major decision. Indianapolis's recycling rates are abysmal because there is no incentive to recycle. I think we should look to Bloomington's pay-as-you-throw trash/recycling program. Recycling is free; residents pay per bag of trash. The amount of trash in Bloomington has decreased steadily and recycling has increased. See: <http://sustainableindiana2016.org/bloomington-pay-as-you-throw/> . This is a great opportunity for Indianapolis to move in the right direction for sustainability. Let's consider all the options.

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**Jon** → Leslie Flowers (2) • 2 years ago



This is definitely the way we should go.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**Jim** • 2 years ago



Having been a human being for most of my life, I know that humans do what is easiest. We currently take our recycling to the different centers scattered around the city because there has always been one near where I work and it is free. Technology can solve everything. Superstition usually keeps people from effectively using technology. If I can throw all my stuff in one container and I know that some portion of it gets recycled, then that is what I am going to do. The technology can improve over time and if goals are set, the amount of recyclable stuff coming out of a glump of trash/recyclable stuff will continue rising.

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**Matt II** • 2 years ago



How about providing recycling containers for free to all residents and charging a no recycle fee or "contamination fee" if they don't use it for X number of consecutive pickups?

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**Matt** • 2 years ago



Have you heard about this?

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