

Will Indy ever recycle like a big city?

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City	Type of Program	Frequency of Pick-Up	Size of Bin	Additional Fee?
INDIANAPOLIS, IN	Subscription	Bi-Weekly	96 Gallon Cart	Yes: \$81/yr
LOUISVILLE, KY	Voluntary	Weekly	38 Gallon Bin	No
CINCINNATI, OH	Voluntary	Bi-Weekly	35 to 46 Gallon Cart	No
COLUMBUS, OH	Voluntary	Bi-Weekly	48 Gallon Cart	No

(Photo: Brian Eason/IndyStar)

In the aftermath of an Indiana Court of Appeals decision to nix a controversial long-term recycling deal, Indianapolis city officials and environmental advocates are looking to build a new program from scratch based on resident input.

The state of recycling in Indianapolis today is among the worst of any major city in America, according to industry studies.

Just 10 percent of Indianapolis households participate in the city's curbside recycling program.

And even after you factor in drop-off recycling, only 5.8 percent of residential waste is recycled. The nationwide recycling rate is 34 percent, according to a [2014 Environmental Protection Agency study \(https://www.epa.gov/smm/advancing-sustainable-materials-management-facts-and-figures\)](https://www.epa.gov/smm/advancing-sustainable-materials-management-facts-and-figures).

More than 50 residents, elected officials and advocates gathered at the Garfield Park Arts Center on Wednesday afternoon to brainstorm the answer to a question that has eluded the city for more than a decade: What should a modern, effective recycling program look like in Indianapolis?

"Let's not limit ourselves today," said Jeff Bennett, the deputy mayor of community development. "Let's not get bogged down in what limits us," such as costs, politics or other considerations.

Of course, it's those limitations — and a perceived lack of public interest — that have helped maintain the status quo.

Today, households in single-family homes can subscribe to a \$6.75 a month, or \$81 a year, curbside recycling program as an add-on to their regular trash pickup. Those who live in apartments have to take their recyclables to drop-off centers, unless their landlord offers special services.

Just 1 in 10 households has been willing to pay extra for the service, and general public apathy has for years made recycling a low priority for politicians. With so many other glaring needs, why spend the money to add a service few seem to care about?

That backdrop is part of what led then-Mayor Greg Ballard to sign the now-defunct commingled recycling deal with Covanta, a solid waste company that incinerates the city's trash.

The single-stream facility would have allowed residents to recycle without actively participating in recycling, because Covanta would have separated reusable materials from the trash after pickup. But environmental groups and Democrats bitterly opposed the \$45 million facility, likening it to "dirty recycling." They argued that many materials would be contaminated by the waste, rendering them useless on the market.

"Recycling trash isn't a terrible idea. It's not even a bad idea," Republican Councilman Jeff Miller said Wednesday, offering a tempered defense of the Ballard program. "But it's not a progressive idea. ... It's a fallback plan."

Shortly after Mayor Joe Hogsett, a Democrat, took office, he announced a temporary suspension of the contract, saying the city's recycling program should be re-evaluated with input from the public — an aspect that critics said was sorely lacking from the Covanta deal, which was never approved by the City-County Council.



[INDIANAPOLIS STAR](http://www.indystar.com)

[City Covanta halt deal for recycling center opposed by environmentalists](http://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/10/city-covanta-halt-deal-combine-waste-and-recycling/80171180/)

[\(http://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/10/city-covanta-halt-deal-combine-waste-and-recycling/80171180/\)](http://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/10/city-covanta-halt-deal-combine-waste-and-recycling/80171180/)

The Court of Appeals ruling last month voided the contract. But Hogsett on Wednesday reiterated his pledge to solicit public support for whatever plan the city comes up with.

"When I took office three months ago, I promised an administration that was transparent, was responsive and was inclusive of all residents and stakeholders," Hogsett said. "And in the most recent case of the Covanta contract, I am proud to say that a page has been turned, and I couldn't be happier to be here with all of you today to talk about how to write the next chapter in our city's story."

The overwhelming response from those in attendance: Indy should have a recycling program that's more accessible, and a public that's better educated on why they should participate.

Carey Hamilton, executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition, said the city need only look around the state for better models.

In the metro area alone, Speedway, Lawrence, Beech Grove, Carmel and Zionsville already provide curbside recycling service to all residents. Elsewhere in the state, Bloomington diverts trash at a rate slightly higher than the national average of 34 percent, while Valparaiso recycles 52 percent of its trash, according to figures provided by the two cities.

But several noted that better access alone wouldn't help without better public education.

Jessica Davis, director of the Office of Sustainability at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, said students there are practically "tripping over recycling bins" that have been installed on campus. But the campus recycling rate in 2013 was just 10 percent — dead last among peer campuses. Next to last, she said, recycled 25 percent of its waste.

Davis attributes the lack of recycling to the broader culture in Indianapolis, pointing to surveys her office has done of IUPUI's staff.

"The longer someone had lived in Indianapolis, the less likely they were to recycle at home," Davis said, eliciting gasps from the crowd.

"We will see massive indirect benefits," she said, if Indy improves its own recycling program.

The trick, of course, will be paying for it.

Curbside recycling for all will mean longer routes for trash contractors, and those costs could be passed on to residents through higher trash bills. According to figures provided at the meeting, Indianapolis' tax levy for trash pickup is roughly \$111 per year, plus a flat \$32 fee. Households who opt for recycling pay an additional \$81 per year.

Carmel's levy is around \$119, Greenwood's is \$162 and Lawrence charges \$180. All three offer recycling included in the base cost.

Kent Moore, an Indianapolis resident, said he has been interested in recycling since 1981, only to see logistical hurdles and politics get in the way of reforms.

After listening to presenters talk about the economic benefits of recycling — Indiana is home to a number of manufacturers that use recycled goods — Moore wondered aloud whether the manufacturing industry should take a bigger role in pushing for public policy reform.

"We have to understand, when we recycle, we're not just throwing it into a different bin," Moore said. "We're creating a feedstock for an industry. ... They need to be taking the forefront — they need to be out there saying we need these materials."



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Indiana Court of Appeals voids Indy recycling deal

(<http://www.indystar.com/story/news/politics/2016/02/24/indiana-court-appeals-voids-indy-recycling-contract/80872520/>)

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