

Indy's proposed recycling program isn't good enough

Carey Hamilton 11:11 a.m. EDT June 13, 2014



(Photo: Star file)

The future of recycling in Indianapolis is at a crossroads. One path provides a first-class program — a user-friendly, free curbside-for-all recycling program — that would create more than 1,000 new local jobs while maximizing the recyclable feedstock for Indiana's manufacturers.

The other path would be bad for Indiana businesses, bad for Indiana workers and bad for Indianapolis' image as a world-class sustainable city.

Paul Gilman: [Mayor's recycling plan would reduce waste, save money \(/story/opinion/2014/06/13/mayors-recycling-plan-reduce-waste-save-money/10419599/\)](#)

The free curbside program could be supported by outside financing. Wal-Mart, Coca-Cola and several of the largest consumer product companies have banded together to create the new "Closed Loop Fund" to provide financing for curbside recycling so they can get Indy's recycled resources to fuel their supply chains. State grants are also readily available, working in concert with the Fund to make this effective recycling model a reality. Curbside-for-all, based on evidence from across the country, would result in a 36 percent recycling rate of all waste (which does not rely on everyone participating), generating nearly 100,000 tons of high-quality recyclables every year. Indianapolis taxpayers would pay nothing.

Unfortunately, another vision is competing for the city's attention. It asks Indy residents to throw everything — including high-quality, clean recyclable resources like glass, aluminum, plastic and paper — into the trash. Covanta — the company that runs Indy's trash incinerator — proposes to sort out the recyclables before going to the incinerator. This process that mixes dirty diapers and food waste with recyclables and compacts them in trash trucks doesn't work very well.

Covanta estimates it would achieve a 23.5 percent recycling rate — recovering at best 65,000 tons per year — an estimate manufacturers who rely on recycled feedstock believe is unrealistic. And due to the contamination inherent in this dirty process, what is recycled likely won't be of the high quality that a first-class recycling program delivers. That's why many of our members — paper, plastic, glass and aluminum manufacturers — have expressed alarm with Covanta's proposal.

Indiana produces more glass than any other state but California. Our glass industry could use every bit of glass Indy residents generate. However, Covanta would not recycle glass at all. That hurts workers, and considering Indiana has a particularly large commodity-manufacturing sector, the job creation and other economic benefits that would be realized by a first-class program will largely be lost. And, certainly, much of the resource conservation and significant energy savings that result from effective recycling will be lost as well.

That's why a contract with Covanta would be bad for Indiana businesses, bad for Indiana workers and bad for Indianapolis' image as a world-class sustainable city.

Overall, this is an exciting time for recycling in Indiana. This year, Gov. Mike Pence and a bipartisan coalition of legislators enacted into law a statewide goal to recycle 50 percent of Indiana's waste stream. Our leaders in the Statehouse recognize the importance of recycling to Indiana's economy, workforce and environment. It would be a shame if Indiana's largest city bought into a recycling plan that — at best — aims to achieve less than half that goal.

Mayor Greg Ballard has led the city to a number of cutting-edge solutions that benefit residents and position Indianapolis as a trailblazing, prosperous place to live. We've supported the mayor's efforts to put the city on the map from a sustainability perspective and will continue to do so when initiatives make sense from an environmental, economic and social perspective. Covanta's proposal offers a path backwards. What we propose is a top-notch recycling program befitting a city that wants to lead the nation in quality of life and economic opportunity.

Indianapolis deserves a first-class recycling program. Join me in encouraging the mayor to hit pause on the Covanta proposal and to consider newly available resources that would provide a first-class program.

Hamilton is executive director of the Indiana Recycling Coalition.

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