

Hamilton and Wenham Are Leaders in Curbside Composting

By DANIEL DeMAINA

Six years ago, the neighboring towns of Hamilton and Wenham made history as the first municipalities on the East Coast to offer curbside organic waste collection to all residents. Hamilton saw its solid waste tonnage quickly decrease by one-third, and Wenham's decreased by about one-fifth, according to Gretel Clark, chair of Hamilton's Waste Reduction Committee and the woman behind its organic waste (a.k.a. composting) program. Hamilton saved more than \$40,000 in one year because of reduced solid waste tonnage fees, while Wenham saved \$12,000.

Clark suggested that Hamilton's higher numbers initially could be attributed to a town policy—since changed—to collect recycling and organic waste every week, while collecting trash every other week. She acknowledged that the composting rate has since declined by about half, in large part because residents pushed to reinstate weekly trash pickup in 2016 and because new town residents aren't as aware of the program. She added that the Waste Reduction Committee's predecessor, the Recycling Committee, "sort of disbanded" after the organic waste program's successful launch.

"You really need to be there full-time, enforcing your town's policies and keeping people new to town in the loop and reminded of the program," she said.

The Waste Reduction Committee, renamed in August 2018, is now focusing on trying to improve the town's composting rates, while dealing with challenges in the recycling marketplace.

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Curbside organic waste bins and countertop kitchen bins await new residents at Hamilton Town Hall. (Photo by John Ouellette)

Pilots Lead to Townwide Programs

The composting program came out of a 2004 study by the Hamilton-Wenham chapter of the League of Women Voters on a pay-as-you-throw trash program, which both towns adopted in 2007. After joining Hamilton's Recycling Committee, Clark helped to narrow its focus on residential trash, and began studying curbside composting.

In early 2009, the Recycling Committee organized a curbside composting pilot with seventy-four volunteer households, each of which received a thirteen-gallon composting bin. New England Solid Waste picked up the compostables—primarily household food waste—and hauled the waste to Brick Ends Farm in Hamilton.

New England Solid Waste President Roy Ferreira offered to do the hauling for free, and Brick Ends Farm waived the \$40 per ton food waste tipping fee. New England Solid Waste reported that the participating households diverted one-third to one-half of their total solid waste into the composting bins.

An expanded pilot program then ran for a year beginning in April 2010, with more than 500 participating households paying \$75 each to cover hauling charges. During the pilot, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection provided guidance through its regional coordinator. Data indicated that each participant diverted an average of 15 pounds

continued on page 29

continued from page 9

per week from trash into the composting bin. Having this data was critical to the town's approving a townwide program in 2011, Clark said.

"By the time we came to a vote, the reason it was approved was that we were going to save money," she explained. "It had nothing to do with the environment. . . . At that time, recyclables were seen as free, and it was the solid waste we were paying for. That's why getting organics out of the solid waste was the clear next step."

The townwide rollout required even more support. The MassDEP stepped in with grant funding. Ann McGovern, consumer waste reduction coordinator at the MassDEP, said the department approved a \$41,350 grant to provide composting bins for each Hamilton household. When Wenham rolled out composting the following year, the MassDEP provided \$36,000 for its bins. (The MassDEP has a statewide contract for recycling carts and bins, home composting bins, office recycling bins, rain barrels and more, so communities that don't receive grants can still purchase these supplies at a discount. Interested cities and towns should contact McGovern at ann.mcgovern@state.ma.us.)

Enforcement, Education Are Paramount

Clark knows that public education is key to a successful program. When Hamilton first piloted curbside composting, she created a Trash Hotline and took questions and complaints from residents, defusing opposition to the program while alleviating the stress on the Department of Public

Works. The challenge today, she said, is continuing public education about recycling and organic waste, while maintaining enforcement of trash policies.

"Having successfully implemented a dynamite program, our mistake was to think that it would proceed on its own from then on," she said. "Unfortunately, populations change over time." It's not surprising that new residents need to be educated when they move into town, she said, but longtime residents "also need to be reminded about the importance of sticking with the original rules." Haulers and their employees need to be reminded, too.

The Waste Reduction Committee has begun visiting some households ahead of the hauler on trash days, assessing waste and leaving orange Rejected stickers explaining to residents why their bin would not be taken. One common reason could be plastic film, like grocery bags, in a recycling bin. Sometimes, the hauler had been picking up contaminated bins anyway. "Their company was telling them, when residents called and complained, to go back and pick up the bins," Clark said. "So they just took everything, whether compliant or not."

"Of course, they also said it takes more time to mark up an orange Rejected sticker saying why they left it," she added. "They don't really want to have to spend the time helping us and clarifying to residents why their bin was left behind."

For more information about Hamilton's organic waste program, visit www.hamiltonma.gov/government/waste-reduction-committee/organic-waste-program. ❁