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## Rewarding recycling

In new program, Northwest Philadelphians will begin getting incentives next month to separate their trash

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IF YOU think recycling is as routine as taking out the trash, think again.

After 17 years of picking up papers, cans and bottles to keep them out of the landfill, Philadelphia is still near the bottom of the rubbish bin in terms of household participation.

Right now, Philly residents recycle barely 6 percent of their household trash, the city recycling office says - a number dwarfed by collections in most of the nation's other largest cities.

And now - in the latest of many attempts to light a fire under the recycling program - the city plans to try rewarding people who put out more stuff.

Starting with just a few thousand homes in Northwest Philadelphia, the city next month will begin weighing curbside recycling bins and passing out money-saving coupons for hefty loads. If it works, homes in other parts of the city may eventually be offered similar rewards.

"If we're right on this, I think we can revolutionize recycling," said city recycling director David Robinson.

But the revolution - if it happens - won't come overnight.

The rock-bottom fact is that Philly residents have never recycled more than an average 7 percent of their household trash.

"I am not satisfied with the diversion rate in the city," said Streets Commissioner Clarena Tolson, "in that it has not varied greatly since its inception."

So why don't thousands of Philadelphians recycle - yet?

People who *do* put out their bottles and newspapers have a quick explanation.

"They're too lazy," says Donald Geiger of Wissinoming, "They don't want to take extra time to put it in an extra receptacle and put it out."

"We've had problems for years now. We're obviously struggling, so the 'same old' just isn't working anymore." said Christine Knapp of the Recycling Alliance of Philadelphia, a coalition of civic and environmental groups.

The alliance contends recycling hasn't been a priority for city government since at least the early 1990s. Knapp says the recycling program has lacked money under the Rendell and Street administrations to invest in enforcement, public education programs, equipment and innovative programs, like the pilot program that's planned now.

So while Geiger and his wife, Bette, routinely take their bags of newspapers to the curb near Ditman and Comly streets on collection day, many people across Philadelphia still are *not* recycling.

- Only 40 percent of Philly households recycle at least once for every two times the recycling truck rolls around, Robinson said.

- Most of the nation's other largest cities consistently do better - as do many towns in the Philly suburbs. Philadelphia's residential recycling rate is less than one-third that in Los Angeles, Chicago and Phoenix.

- About 100,000 tons of potential recyclables gets tossed in the household trash in Philadelphia every year, while just 45,000 tons goes into the recycling truck, Robinson said. And this in the city that pioneered urban curbside recycling in the late 1980s, years before Pennsylvania made household recycling mandatory.

"Bottom line: we have some work to do," says Robinson. "But I'm encouraged."

The encouragement stems largely from the fact that the economics of recycling have taken a sharp turn for the better, Robinson said. The city now gets about \$1 million a year for marketing its recyclables, instead of having to pay to get rid of them, as it did four years ago. He says the \$44.79 a ton now reaped by the city may be the highest along the East Coast.

Recycling advocates say the city could save millions just by boosting recycling levels.

But the Streets Department says it costs more to pick up the recyclables, bringing the total cost of recycling to \$142.30 a ton, against \$112.85 a ton to collect and dispose of trash.

The pilot program that starts in January will try to change that, using compactor trucks, which are like trash trucks, to cram more into each recycling run.

The program, which involves 6,000 homes in pockets of West Oak Lane, Germantown, Mount Airy and Chestnut Hill, will offer a carrot in the form of discount coupons, rather than a stick, to motivate recyclers. Those residents will be able to get up to \$25 a month in coupons they can redeem in restaurants like the Trolley Car Diner on Germantown Avenue, the Reading Terminal Market, or stores such as ShopRite, Whole Foods or Sneaker Villa in West Oak Lane.

Two years ago, Philly's sanitation officers tried the stick. They began writing \$25 tickets to people who tossed recyclables in the trash. But homeowners complained and the Streets Department aborted the program within months, reportedly under pressure from Mayor Street's office. No tickets to enforce the city's recycling law have been issued since - but the department this year again began issuing written warnings, Tolson said.

"The biggest problem with participation in Philadelphia is... that the city doesn't enforce the city recycling laws and give people tickets and fines," said Richard Babst, a commercial recycling consultant who heads the city's Recycling Advisory Committee.

## Consistency a key

Recycling has been less confusing in some other top-10 cities that have nearly left us in the dust in terms of residential recycling.

"We purposely have not changed the program since we started in 1995 when it went citywide," said David McDaniel, assistant solid waste manager in San Antonio, Texas, one of at least four cities over 1 million population that recycle at least 20 percent of household trash.

In Phoenix, solid waste analyst Terry Gellenbeck said the city recycling program has had no major changes either. "The consistency helped," he said, because people know what's going on.

And Chicago also has stuck with its system, which relies heavily on processing, with recyclables collected in blue bags with the trash. Los Angeles is credited with more recycling than the other cities, due partly to heavy collections of yard and landscape waste.

In Philadelphia, meanwhile, weekly recycling was cut back to every other week when the state forced it to go citywide in the early 1990s. Participation dropped off sharply in some of the Northeast and Northwest neighborhoods where it first was popular.

Recycling changed to trash day in 2002, after years on the day before trash day. Each household follows a "blue week" or "green week" collection schedule - except in Center City and Northwest Philadelphia, which now have collections every week.

Confusion and laziness are only part of the rubbish problem facing Philadelphia.

Streets Commissioner Tolson pointed to the physical challenges of collecting waste in Philly's rowhouse neighborhoods, with their scant room for trash storage and their narrow, one way streets.

And people, she added, can definitely be part of the problem. "There certainly is a challenge with bad behavior - trash being thrown out of windows, trash being piled up in alleyways." Next year she plans a renewed push to fight litter citywide.

But Tolson contends Philadelphia can "absolutely" overcome its sluggish recycling performance. She said the incentive program will try to "engage people" in recycling efforts.

Here's what the city plans:

New 35-gallon recycling containers on wheels, each with an embedded radio frequency chip (similar to a bar code) to identify each house, will be distributed. Equipment on the truck will be able to read the chip, lift the bin and weigh the recyclables.

Residents will get \$5 worth of coupons for each 10 pounds recycled. More than 30 companies have signed on to accept coupons.

In the pilot area, residents will put out newspapers in the same wheeled bin as bottles and cans, in a "single -stream" recycling tactic that's taken hold in Phoenix, San Antonio and other cities.

The downside of single-stream recycling, experts say, is that some operations are plagued with contamination of marketable paper with broken bits of glass. Robinson said materials in the pilot will be checked for any increase in contamination before any decision is made to expand.

A recycling company and a non-profit organization plan to handle the program without charging the city, in hopes their new tactics will pay off later. Blue Mountain Recycling, in South Philadelphia, has installed the first single-stream equipment in the Philly area, to separate the paper from other materials.

The new nonprofit called RecycleBank will manage the incentive part of the program.

Residents on the test routes will be able to put out plastic bottles and heavy cardboard - materials not picked up by recycling trucks elsewhere in the city.

Meanwhile, what happens in the rest of the Philly?

Recycling continues on the current schedule - every other week in most neighborhoods, every week in Center City and Northwest Philadelphia.