

SUCCESSFULLY SWITCHED TO SINGLE-STREAM

IS YOUR CURBSIDE RECYCLING PROGRAM READY FOR THE BIG CHANGE TO SINGLE-STREAM? ONE WASTE AUTHORITY IN IOWA MADE THE MOVE AND IDENTIFIED THEIR “BIG THREE” CONCEPTS NECESSARY FOR A WINNING SWITCH.

BY BEVERLY RIVERA DAVIS

After a full year of transitioning to a single-stream residential recycling program, Des Moines, Iowa’s Metro Waste Authority reported successful results that included racking up a 20 percent increase in recycling tonnage, improved resident participation — with some community participation rates hitting 90 percent — and holding a lid on contamination rates to four percent, compared to the national average of 15 percent.

“The root of our success can be summed up in three words — recruitment, communications, and choice — all of which helped us avoid the major pitfalls experienced by most communities during a transition into single-stream recycling, but there were still challenges to overcome,” says Tom Hadden, Executive Director of Des Moines’ Metro Waste Authority, the largest solid waste disposal agency in Iowa.

How these positive results were created and many of the problems typical of maiden single-stream programs successfully circumvented is synthesized in one simple phrase — “The Big Three” — by the men and women who answer Metro Waste Authority’s telephone help line, conduct planning and feasibility studies, set tipping fees, and devise creative financing sufficient to

rollout 76,000 fully automated recycling carts in twenty-two different communities ranging from sprawling suburb to small rural neighborhood.

“We’re optimistic by the early signs of success,” says Hadden.

The big three

According to Metro Waste Authority, the three most important factors contributing to their first year single-stream results include:

- Bidding for an automated materials recovery facility (MRF) and hauler
- Choosing at least two different automated cart sizes
- Developing and implementing a continual and comprehensive communication program with both city partners and residents

Recruitment

After a feasibility study showed that an automated materials recovery facility and hauler were needed to make single-stream recycling a sustainable and profitable, request for proposals (RFPs) were requested. Two were subsequently prepared and approved by

the Metro Waste Authority Board of Directors.

The collection RFP was issued and included the required criteria:

- Bi-weekly collection preferred, with costs for weekly collection also requested
- 96-gallon wheeled carts for all eligible residents with small cart option
- Cart costs financed and owned by Metro Waste Authority
- Eligible recyclables remained same with colored glass added
- Wind screens/shield required on trucks (minimize litter when tipping carts)
- Two-part CPI for annual increases (percentage based on non-fuel & fuel)
- Seven-year term; option for two three-year renewals
- Cost quote cost in dollars per-household, per-month.

The processing RFP included the following requirements:

- Facility located in a member community
- Processing to and marketing to appropriate specifications
- Revenue sharing with Metro Waste Authority
- 10-year term; option for two five-year renewals.

Two separate teams were set up to review the proposals: The collection RFP

committee included seven representatives from member community city councils and public works departments; The processing RFP committee representatives included four members – a mayor, a city council member, a county supervisor and a city manager – from Metro Waste Authority’s member communities.

Waste Management, the nation’s largest hauler, was chosen as the new hauler and Greenstar of North America (then MidAmerican Recycling) received the nod to become the new MRF.

After winning the contract Greenstar invested \$4 million in a new automated system at their current location in Des Moines, which increased their materials rate from two-to-three tons per hour, using manual sorting, to a highly mechanized 15 tons per hour.

However, Public Affairs Director Reo Menning said, “Our dedicated customer-help-phone line and ability to solve problems quickly diminished many of our early start up hiccups with the program and by the end of the first year, we had experienced the biggest recycling increase in the 16-year history of our residential recycling program.”



Woman rolling new curb it! cart to curbside.

Sustainability

As a result of the new single-stream program, a total of over 26,000 tons of recyclables were collected across the metro Des Moines area last year, resulting in more than 5,000 garbage trucks being diverted from the landfill.

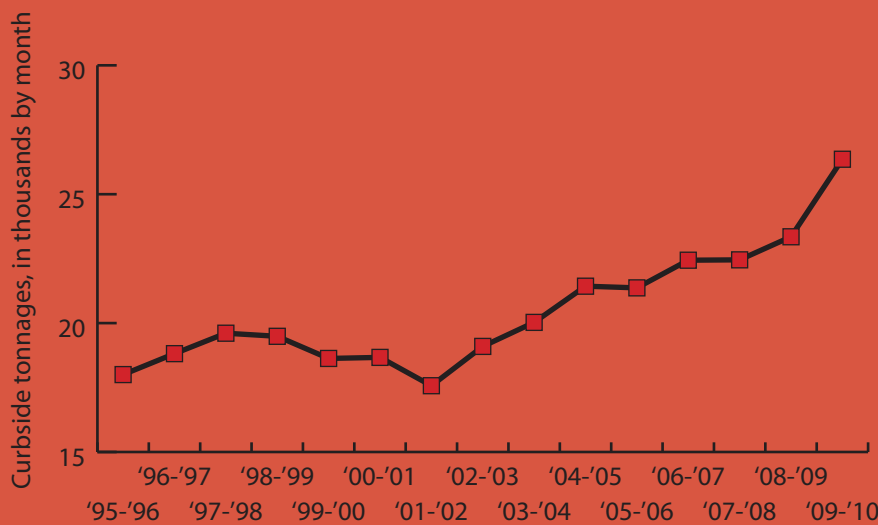
The single-stream program brought in an additional 3,000 recyclable tons with an overall participation rate of 72 percent across their entire service area. The new program also lowered the collection costs by nearly \$0.40 cents per household per month, saving more than \$300,000 for Metro Waste Authority’s community members in the first year.

Steve Gaer, Mayor of the largest suburb in the metro Des Moines area, quoted the reduced collection fees as a win-win for his city when their costs fell from \$2.75 per household under the old multi-sort, green bin-recycling program to \$2.38 per household for the automated single-stream cart collection.

It’s not just increased recycling tonnage and revenues that spurred Metro Waste Authority and their municipal members to sign onto the latest green wave of residential recycling.

Metro Waste Authority is a designated EMS organization, committed to best environmental practices and view their

Figure 1 | Recycling chart increases in past 15 years



Source: Metro Waste Authority, 2010

“Goldilocks” cart choosing system

Choosing the “just right size” automated carts for single stream recycling might be referred to as the “Goldilocks” system based on the experience of Metro Waste Authority.

“Our 2007 survey of residents revealed that getting the right cart would make a difference in how well the program was accepted by our residents,” said Tom Hadden, Executive Director of Metro Waste Authority.

Automated carts were the biggest capital investment for Metro Waste Authority and selecting the right supplier would be an essential component to creating a successful transition from their multi-sort to single-stream recycling program. These five factors guided Metro Waste Authority’s final decision:

- Size (two sizes required for resident satisfaction)

- Appearance (carts had to wear well/still look good after 10 years of use)
- Functionality (had to be large enough to hold volumes of recyclables and cardboard)
- Warranty service (manufacturer 10-year warranty plus reputation for standing behind it)
- Cost

After researching cart styles and sizes, most vendors offered Metro Waste Authority three standard sizes: 35, 64, and 96-gallon and one vendor also offered an additional 48-gallon size.

Their first choice of the larger 96-gallon cart size was easy — it could hold all the recyclables that fit into MWA’s former 5-sort program — but it wouldn’t work or be acceptable for all residents. A smaller size was needed

for residents with space constraints in storing the cart. Size was also a factor for the elderly or physically challenged.

The 35-gallon was too small — it couldn’t hold cardboard — and the 64-gallon would hold all the recyclables but didn’t have a small enough footprint. But the 48-gallon size “was just right,” measureably smaller in space yet large enough to hold recyclables including cardboard.

Metro Waste Authority purchased both the larger 96-gallon and 48-gallon carts from Toter, Inc the only manufacturer offering both sizes and financed the 76,000-cart purchase through a 7-year loan. Revenue from the recycling program is used to make the loan payments.

transition to single-stream as the next logical step toward sustainability, controlling litter on the streets by no longer using the small green bins without lids, protecting air and water quality as well as prolonging the productivity of their landfills.

Community buy-in

Securing community buy-in and the early support for the program by city staffs and elected officials through Metro Waste Authority’s communications program were key to making the switch work.

“The biggest factor in allowing the new single-stream program to move forward was all the suburbs coming together in one program,” says Mayor Steve Gaer. “It gave us the critical mass to recruit an MRF and get better pricing and collection fees and communicate to all the communities and residents with one consistent message that Metro Waste Authority developed and implemented.”

Targeted resident communications

Metro Waste Authority’s comprehensive communications started a year before the first new carts were rolled out, including: developing custom brochures and mailing them out to every household; producing direct mail letters; holding press conferences and writing press releases; designing recycling cart labels; advertising through television, radio and print; inserts in city

newsletters and utility bills; links with member community websites; and how-to video segments online and on city cable channels.

“I credit the majority of our success from targeting our education and spending the resources it took to communicate to

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76,000 residents on their specific pick-up dates, acceptable and non-acceptable recycling items and cart choices. It was a Herculean task that started a year before the new single-stream program,” said Menning.

Cart size choices

During their research, Metro Waste Authority discovered that offering a choice of cart size was absolutely crucial for single-stream

success, particularly when dealing with their wide and diverse service area.

“Even within one city, West Des Moines, with 58,000 residents, we have 40 percent who live in apartments or townhouses, so offering a choice of the new automated single-stream carts — either 96-gallon or 48-gallon — were going to be a decision for the homeowner,” said Mayor Gaer.

All of Metro Waste Authority’s twenty-two community members consist of divergent profiles and each single-family residence had the option to choose which cart size was right for them based on their family size, storage capacity, and recycling habits. (See sidebar for more information)

“If we delivered a cart size the resident didn’t like, we would go out and exchange it. It wasn’t very efficient in the beginning, but we increased satisfaction and participation with single-stream because of choice and service,” said Hadden.

Winning combination: The big three

Mayor Gaer summed up Metro Waste Authority’s successful single-stream’s first year performance and the difference between their experience and others who didn’t reach their desired outcomes by switching to single stream:

“There was a uniform communication outreach program, they offered a choice of carts, and we chose the right collection and processing partners.”

Place these items in your cart

Questions or concerns?

Missed pick up? 24-GREEN

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curb it!

Recycle and Roll



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"necked" bottles and
yogurt/margarine tubs
NO LIDS



Metro Waste Authority

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Cardboard

break down and cut
to fit into container



Newspaper

including inserts

Mixed paper

including junk mail,
phone books,
magazines



Tin/aluminum cans

Glass Jars & Bottles

ALL colors



DO NOT place these items in the cart: garbage, yard debris, styrofoam, plastic bags, containers which previously contained hazardous materials (such as motor oil or paint), electronics, or anything not listed above. **WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!**

Adding one more tip for any community considering transitioning to single stream, Mayor Gaer noted that "When considering transitioning to single-stream, don't underestimate the effect of good communications and educating your residents. I think it helped a lot that our citizens were already well-educated by Metro Waste Authority with the more complicated 5-sort recycling bins and it

made switching to the single automated recycling cart a lot easier ... and more successful." RR

Beverly Rivera Davis is a freelance journalist, writer, and author. After living in upstate New York and in Vienna, Austria, where she wrote speeches for the U.S. Ambassador and reported on U.S. Presidential campaigns for major European

publications and Huffingtonpost.com, she has returned to her hometown of Des Moines, Iowa and learned the meaning of the acronym's MRF and EMS. She can be contacted at davisbeverly42@gmail.com.

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