

May 8, 2020

## **A Proposal for Possible Changes to Bowdoinham Recycling Amid COVID-19**

The new coronavirus has shut down activities at the Recycling Barn, adding costs to the solid waste budget and eliminating many disposal options for residents. To reduce expenses, restore full services such as hazardous waste recovery, bulky waste, metals, and other items, and to improve recycling safety in COVID-time, the Town may need to reconfigure what materials it recycles, and how it receives them.

When Bowdoinham's recycling program began over 30 years ago, the Town collected, sorted, and processed only materials that were marketable. With the advent of zero-sort recycling, the Town decided in the late 2000s to deliver commingled containers (plastic, glass, and metal) to Casella Recycling in West Bath for about \$30/ton, saving several thousand dollars annually by eliminating our sorting costs.

Fast forward to 2018-2019, after the Chinese refused to accept shoddy product from the giant, very expensive U.S. sorting facilities. The only way these companies can stay in business, with decreased revenue from sales, is by charging their customers more to use their system. The town is now paying nearly \$200/ton to load and deliver commingled containers to Casella. This has eliminated our savings from the move to zero-sort and has instead become a major expense.

With the future uncertainties the COVID pandemic has brought to the recycling world, it seems unlikely big firms like Casella will be lowering their tip fees anytime soon. This proposal will let the Town avoid these fees and restore services and local control.

A system is possible to allow residents to safely drop materials off, and Barn staff to safely process them. The key to this would be to separate the residents from the Staff, with the residents outside the building and staff on the inside.

There are seven windows and three large door openings on the north side of the Barn, each of which could serve as a drop-off location for a specific material - for example, window #1 for clear #2 plastic (mostly milk jugs), window #2 for colored #2 plastic, window #3 for #5 plastic, window #4 for metal cans, window #5 for glass containers, window #6 for newspaper, window #7 for magazines, and the large door openings would serve to collect cardboard and mixed paper. Only these three types of plastic indicated would be accepted. All other plastic containers would go into household trash.

Inside the Barn there would be pallet boxes (barrels for the cans and glass) under each window, to be swapped out by Barn staff as they filled up. The plastics would be set aside until there was enough of one kind to make a bale. Metal cans would be recycled into the scrap metal roll-off container. The glass containers would be collected in barrels and crushed by staff. The crushed

glass could be used as fill by the Town or a local contractor. No recyclable materials would go to Casella.

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A major benefit would be that without the trucking runs to West Bath, the town truck would be available at the loading dock for direct deposit of all oversized bulky waste (OBW), loaded by residents instead of staff, who now drag heavy couches and other large discarded items 40 feet along the 2nd floor loft to be dumped into the truck.

Collection of non-recyclable waste, including waste oil, paint, e-waste, waste wood, batteries, and tires would occur in the east end of the building, where the access to the OBW truck is located.

The remaining materials would be handled as they have in the past, with some lag time (2 or 3 days) between collection and baling of cardboard and mixed paper. This would nullify Covid transmission from these materials. All incoming materials would be moved around inside the Barn with pallet jacks, so there would be no direct staff contact.

Curbside recycling should be encouraged, especially because it limits the number of residents using the Barn. Residents would not put out a bag of mixed cans, plastic, and glass, but would put out a full bag of metal containers, or a bag of #2 plastic, or a bag of glass for pickup along with the other sorted materials they might have.

Restarting our recycling program under this format would save the Town the approximately \$200/ton that we are paying for trucking and tip fees for the mixed recyclables and mixed paper that we are hauling to West Bath weekly. The cost of processing the plastics would definitely be outweighed by the value of the baled material (currently around \$750/ton), and the metal and glass containers could be recycled at little cost. Mixed paper could be baled and stored for less than it costs the Town for disposal with Casella, and future sales of this material would only increase the Town's avoided cost of handling mixed paper in-house.

Given the uncertainty of a future which may require long term social distancing, opening the Recycling Barn in the immediate future to full use will require separation of the staff and the public. Opening the Barn to receive the same materials that came in when things were "normal" will mean the Town can begin to sell trash tags again, and will no longer have to offer free trash pickup to the entire community. The loss of trash tag income and the cost of free trash pickup have put a serious strain on the solid waste budget, and those costs will keep adding up until the Town can go back to a full-service Recycling Barn.

I would welcome discussion of this proposal with the new Solid Waste Committee and/or the Selectboard and would be glad to lead a tour of the facility to discuss eventual questions.

David Berry Solid Waste Manager,  
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