

# HOUSTON RECYCLING

By Greg Varhaug

In 2016, *The Guardian* put Houston near the top of the list in its search for “the world’s most wasteful city.” San Francisco diverts 80 percent of its disposable waste from landfills for composting and recycling. Seattle’s diversion rate is 57 percent; Austin’s is 42 percent. Houston’s current diversion rate is 19 percent. Of that, 13 percent is from compostable materials, and 6 percent is from recycling.

Houston has come a long way since the days of school newspaper drives and the dim awareness that pouring used motor oil down the sewer isn’t a good idea. The city began a single-stream recycling program in 2010. Most Houston residents received

their green recycling bins in 2014.

Houston now has 10 recycling centers. Different centers accept different materials. The Westpark Consumer Recycling Center, near Fountainview, takes glass containers and Styrofoam. The Environmental Service Center takes household hazardous waste like paint, fertilizers, and batteries. The city’s recycling outreach includes special events and mobile pickup centers for household waste.

Recycling isn’t just a government-mandated boondoggle. There’s cash in trash. Dallas and Fort Worth are just two cities whose recycling centers have run at a profit for years, creating jobs in the process. The private recycling business has taken off in the past decade. Many Houston companies have had multi-stream recycling in place for years, usually contracting with an outside company to provide receptacles and collect waste.

There are markets for materials

generated from recycling, like glass cullet, plastic resins, and precious metals. New markets are emerging as people find ever more creative uses for recycled materials. Many retailers are getting in on the act. IKEA, for instance, takes fluorescent lights, batteries, cardboard, and drink containers.

The city’s recycling services were suspended after Hurricane Harvey in late August, but by mid-October, the Houston Solid Waste Management Department had removed more than one million cubic yards of debris. A substantial amount of that was from downed trees.

One of the main benefits of recycling and composting is the reduction of methane released into the atmosphere from landfills. Even though composting and anaerobic digestion create carbon dioxide and methane, they are still a net positive for the environment. Methane, which burns cleaner than coal, can be captured and used for fuel.

Though Houston has been slow to adopt the recycling mindset, it’s gradually becoming part of our routine. We’re dropping off our plastic bags, taking our old files to the shredder, and coordinating recycling trips with our neighbors. While Houston’s single-stream program is far from perfect, it’s an important start. Gradually implementing multi-stream programs, starting with the private sector, could eventually make zero waste in Houston a reality. **N**

*Greg Varhaug owns Pecos Multimedia, which produces video and written content.*



## A BRIGHT IDEA: RECYCLING LIGHT BULBS

Ideally, all non-incandescent light bulbs should be recycled. All fluorescent lights contain mercury, including the green end cap bulbs. The City of Houston recommends that you take fluorescent bulbs and tubes to either the Westpark Center or the Environmental Service Center. Unfortunately, no Houston recyclers currently take broken bulbs. Although LEDs contain toxic substances, no one in Houston currently accepts them for recycling.