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Seattle will be doing more to waste less

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

When it comes to recycling, we're at the top of the heap. Since residential curbside recycling began in Seattle in 1988, our region has been a national role model for turning waste into resources.

But garbage continues to pile up, and we still can do more to waste less. On March 30, the city of Seattle rolls out a major makeover for recycling. Let's look at the new program and how it fits into the big picture.

Q: What are some of the main changes Seattle residents will notice at home?

A: Single-family households will have their combined yard and food waste picked up weekly instead of every two weeks, and more types of food will be accepted. You'll also be able to put more items in your recycling bin, including paper and plastic cups, plastic food trays and plastic plant pots. See www.seattle.gov/util for full details. Apartment residents may also get recycling upgrades, and they should check with their apartment managers for information.

Q: If we're already so great at recycling, why do we have to do more?

A: This is the beginning of the 10-year contract cycle for garbage and recycling collection, so Seattle Public Utilities wants to use this opportunity to improve services and increase efficiency. The city's garbage goes by rail to an Eastern Oregon landfill, and the city can keep overall costs down by cutting waste and putting less garbage on the train. Conserving resources through better waste management also reduces global warming.

Q: I love keeping food scraps out of the garbage. How will that be different?

A: With the new weekly collection for food and yard waste, Seattle residents will be able to include meat, fish and dairy products with their food scraps and food-soiled paper. Many other King County cities already have

weekly collection with meat, fish and dairy included, and it has worked well. The combined yard and food waste goes to Cedar Grove Composting, a local company that turns it into compost products for the garden.

Q: Will my rates go up?

A: Yes. Seattle's garbage rates will increase more than 40 percent (in two phases over the next nine months) for most residents, although the amount may vary depending on your service. As with the current program, you can pay a lower rate by generating less trash and using a smaller garbage can. The cost of food and yard-waste collection is also going up, but now you will be able to choose from new variable rates and sizes for that bin, saving money if you compost your organic waste yourself at home.

Q: I heard the markets for recycled materials are terrible, so why is the city adding new items for collection such as cups and plant pots?

A: By accepting more items, the city hopes to make recycling less confusing for customers. Markets for recycled paper, plastic and metals have definitely been in the dumps lately, largely due to the economic downturn. But two major local recycling processors say they currently have markets for everything being collected, and the new items will most likely be mixed in with existing materials. Recycling can only keep growing if markets expand, and Seattle and King County both have active market-development efforts.

Q: How about just not creating the waste in the first place?

A: Bingo! Reducing waste will always save more money for consumers and local governments than recycling, and help the planet more. Cut back on packaging with a few simple steps:

- Switch to reusable water bottles and shopping bags.
- Avoid single-serving grocery products.
- Use concentrated detergents and household cleaners.

Q: So, how did the Seattle area become such a leader in recycling anyway?

A: Because of you. Without the incredible public support of recycling here, all we'd have is garbage.

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