

# County's new recycling coordinator investigates cleaner county and fat wallets through recycling



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Sarah Archer, founder of Iris Waste Diversion Specialists, is Barry County's new recycling coordinator.

Barry County has chosen to take a fresh look at what goes into the landfill. After years of give-and-take deliberation, the Barry County Board of Commissioners recently approved a contract with Sarah Archer of Iris Waste Diversion Specialists to help facilitate recycling in Barry County.

Archer, a graduate from Michigan State University, served as the university's recycling director for 5 1/2 years ([see correction below](#)). She became a recycling coordinator for her native Ypsilanti Township, galvanizing her skills and passion for recycling. From there, she jumped out on her own and made other people's waste streams her business.

"That's what I wanted to do, to find homes for stuff people had no use for," she said.

She wanted to see waste streams reduced on a larger scale.

"People called me, asking for a lot of advice," said Archer, finding herself acting as a de facto consultant for communities with questions about recycling. "But I didn't want to fill the typical consulting role of just making plans and advising people, I really wanted to just dig in."

In 2004, she founded Iris Waste Diversion Specialists, a company with far more than consulting in mind.

"My company was established to work with communities and businesses to help them to improve their recycling and waste diversion programs," she said.

Since the inception of Iris in 2004, Archer has served waste and recycling authorities in municipalities large and small.

"We come in and help them with any particular programs they need help in," she said, including getting the word out about recycling through marketing and communication, improving and streamlining resources already in the community.

"In Barry County, we will take what's going on, see what can be better, what we can improve on, what the county might be able to do to facilitate what is already going on."

She pointed to existing recycling programs in Barry County, hoping to draw from homegrown knowledge and infrastructure to create a unified front for recycling.

"I don't think the county itself really wants to be the keeper of everything and have the program running through the county, but more become the facilitator of those programs," she said, stating her goal to facilitate a bridge between townships with burgeoning recycling programs to those with established recycling services, drawing from best practices and making it easier to create effective programs based on each municipality's need.

Archer will literally get knee deep in her job, conducting waste audits and site visits see what's going into Barry County's waste.

"Recycling has evolved in that it's become easier for the resident to participate, but more challenging on the processing side," she said.

Single-stream recycling has eliminated the need for sorting and streamlined the process for residents, but it

leaves facilities with the challenge of sorting and separating metals, glass, plastic and paper, while making recycling streams dirtier and less valuable.

Though recycling is now easier for the average citizen, it translates to decreased revenues and increased expenses for recycling facilities.

“They’re not making the money they used to, and they are starting to pull back, trying to see how they’ll operate on a larger scale,” she said.

Facilities have matched the challenge, in part, with advanced sorting and cleaning technologies. However, this comes with decreased overall revenues for waste haulers, who, despite providing a valuable service, still need to make money.

“Part of our first task when we get on board is to really assess what is going on, what’s happening with the materials, how they’re processed, and identifying what’s going to be the best practice,” Archer said.

The county doesn’t want to dictate recycling programs for townships, she said, opting instead for a facilitated invitation to implement best practices Archer will recommend over the next few years.

The county, she said, will be more likely to say, “‘Hey, here are some options,’ and working with them to implement them.”

Archer will meet individually with townships and haulers to get a picture of the recycle-scape of Barry County.

“It’s going to be a lot of meetings and communication going on,” said Archer, which she believes can be a catalyst for organic, voluntary involvement in recycling on part of municipalities.

She pointed to Hastings Charter Township’s efficient recycling station as a model for township recycling.

“For me, it’s really about relationships right now,” she said, admitting county and township governments aren’t always tied together with warm bonds of trust.

Relationship building is key to building trust understanding.

“I’m not the big-bad county coming in to tell you how to operate your program and force something down your throat,” she said with a laugh.

“This is something that’s good for everybody, residents really do want to do the right thing with materials,” she said.

Her job is to provide possible solutions how that can happen in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way.

Archer will attend board meetings and meet one-on one to establish rapport with county and township officials. From initial meetings, she will nurture relationships with officials to brainstorm recycling best practices and give local people ownership over their recycling resources.

Her past clients have walked away with a better understanding of recycling as a whole.

“We aren’t just putting materials into a box and feeling better about it,” she said, but understanding the implications throughout the entire process. “It impacts not only the environment, but the economics of our state.”

Building awareness and understanding is what they leave with, she said. They also gain clear intent for further recycling initiatives.

Michigan exhibits at 15 percent recycling rate, second to Indiana.

“It’s pretty unfortunate our state hasn’t put the resources in to increase our recycling rate,” said Archer.

According to a Barry County Solid Waste Oversight Committee report, Barry County disposed of 21,986 tons of waste in 2012, but only recycled 750 tons in the same year, a 3 percent recycling rate well below the state average. According to the same report, recycling services are not available to 45 percent of the county’s population.

To Archer, that’s not only unneeded waste entering landfills, but money down the drain.

“It’s an economic benefit to the state,” she said. “We have a strong, healthy recycling industry, because there are companies that utilize recycling products.”

This translates to jobs, she said.

The state is likely to change its waste policy in the future, moving away from landfill-centric models of waste to resource recovery and recycling. Bills are expected to cross legislators’ desks this fall.

“It will help businesses recover materials instead of making sure we have enough space to landfill material,” Archer said.

Likely, it will be years before the state requires counties to update recycling plans. But it will happen within the decade, Archer said, and she hopes to help local governments voluntarily soften the beaches in preparation for state-mandated recycling quotas.

And when the state inevitably intervenes, it will rely heavily on local assets and ways of doing things. Archer’s “resultant” community-based recycling strategy aims to lay the groundwork for what is to come.

The economic promise of recycling is robust, Archer said. She pointed out a plastic packaging company near Ann Arbor.

“Unfortunately, that company, here in Michigan, has to import plastics from outside our state when there’s an abundance of material in our state,” she said as just one example. “We, as Michigan residents, aren’t supporting a processor here in our state [through recycling]. There is value in that material.”

Recycling, as she sees it, is more than an environmental movement, but rather a form of capital to create jobs and revenue for Michiganders.

“There is economic value to it, and there’s evidence of that all across this country,” she said, pointing to the success of other states.

In the long-term, Archer said she hopes to supplement drop-off programs with curbside pickup and education.

“That’s when you see significant increases in recycling,” she said. “It’s about the rural areas, where burning is still common, how can we make it more accessible and educate them.”

“I’m really excited they were able to create this opportunity the board of commissioners would approve,” citing the Barry County Solid Waste Oversight Committee’s desire to see recycling improve in the county over the next decade.

It’s her desire to see townships aware of their options and taking strides to work within their best ability to bring recycling to residents.

“There will be job creation, there will be appeal for potential manufactures to come in and employ residents,” she said. “But we can’t do that until we get a handle on what’s available and what resources are there.”

Her job in Barry County won't be done until local governments have the tools they need to meet that end.

As far as cost, recycling is no different than waste pickup, said Archer.

"Would you throw money in the trash can?" she asked. "Why are people so OK with paying somebody to take their trash away, but they're not so OK with paying to have someone take their recycling away? It's just going to a different place," a place she and research suggests will lead to a cleaner world and greener wallets.

Archer succinctly summed up the often-forgotten economic value of recycling: "You're choosing to put your material in a different place, rather than in the landfill where it will sit for several hundred years. We're going to give it another chance and make it into a product and create jobs."

From both ends of a complicated environmental-social spectrum, recycling is an important tool for environmental sustainability, economic development and community resiliency. It will take work and plenty of mutual understanding and compromise. But, as Archer firmly believes, recycling is far more than a quaint and unrealistic idea, but a monumental opportunity to invest in Barry County.

**Correction:** Archer was the Recycling Director for the University of Michigan for 5 ½ years.