

Report sheds light on better recycling policy in Barry County



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Sarah Archer from Iris Waste Diversion Specialists explains the next steps in helping the county reduce, reuse, and recycle.

A state of the county's recycling opportunities was presented to the Barry County Solid Waste Oversight Committee Friday. Sarah Archer with Iris Waste Diversion Specialists shared her findings on the state of Barry County recycling, and brainstormed possible pathways to diverting more of the county's waste from the landfill to the recycling bin.

Archer was contracted by the county last year to help expand recycling opportunities and participation in Barry County.

After meeting with municipal officials across the county, Archer was able to paint with broad strokes how to improve the county's recycling initiatives. Marketing existing programs, building awareness, gathering further data and focusing on cleaner streams were key takeaways from the study.

Furthermore, Archer recommended improving economy of scale for the county's recycling programs. Economy of scale refers to the proportionate savings in cost gained by increased levels of production. In this case, the focus would be enticing more residents to recycle waste over tossing it.

"Creating more uniformity in regards to recycling helps to improve economy of scale," Archer said.

Townships are willing to discuss cost-sharing agreements, she said. Regardless of whether township officials wanted to invest in recycling directly, all expressed to Archer they're open to education.

The next step is to implement a low-cost education campaign over the summer, which would include a county recycling webpage and toll-free hotline.

"We're also moving toward working a little closer with the townships and providing [the county] with recommendations," Archer said.

Archer was careful not to suggest programs that have worked in other counties but might not be palatable for Barry County residents.

Under the current model of recycling in the county, increased recycling rates would actually increase overall cost, Archer said. Even if recycling is streamlined and expanded, transportation costs to distant processing facilities would still be substantial, she explained.

"Most of the communities are beholden to the haulers taking their materials," she said. "It is really a per-service, per-pull model."

But the short-term pains of getting recycling off the ground are well worth the long-term gains for two reasons. First, the state is running out of places to put garbage. The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality estimates existing Michigan landfills will reach capacity by 2044. According to the DEQ, a total of 49 million cubic yards of trash were disposed of in Michigan landfills in 2016. That's approximately 15,000 Olympic-sized swimming pools of garbage in 2016 alone.

The state's total waste has decreased overall since 2007. The year 2016, however, exhibited the

highest amount of cumulative landfill since 2008, which may mean the state's waste volume is again on the rise.

According to the DEQ, 145,288 cubic yards of waste were disposed in the Hastings landfill in 2016, enough to fill 44.5 Olympic swimming pools. The DEQ estimates another 29 years of remaining capacity at the Hastings facility, while owner Waste Management estimates another 42 years of capacity.

According to a 2013 study conducted by Grand Valley State University, the county only recycles 3 percent of its waste, which rates poorly compared to other counties in the state. Regionally, Michigan exhibits lower recycling rates than other Great Lakes states, Archer said.

She said she hopes waste diversion will extend the service life of landfills for non-recyclable items.

The second incentive for increased recycling helps serve the bottom line. Businesses are becoming more reliant on recyclables as raw materials in their production facilities. Several regional manufacturing facilities rely on recycled plastics, paper, and metals for their products. Many of them have been forced to import materials from out of state, a black spot on the state's recycling profile in Archer's book.

"On the manufacturing side of it, they need a clean product, so our providing convenience to recycle and creating a single-stream recycling system has come at the cost of reducing the quality of the material that we provide to the processors," she said.

If the county can provide a clean product to sell to manufactures, it has a shot at turning a profit to fund a sustainable recycling program. But the catch is that it'll take a little more effort on part of residents and municipalities to get a cleaner recyclables stream.

The convenience of commingled roadside recycling has made waste diversion easier for residents but created a problem for the businesses reliant on the county's recycling stream. Commingled, or single stream, recycling is hard to sort and clean, making it difficult and costly for manufacturers to process. Sorting recycled materials makes the process more arduous for residents, but easier for businesses that utilize the final product.

That fact is nothing to shake a stick at, Archer said, requiring a long hard look at the trade-off of a poor-quality recycling stream for convenience's sake.

"We need to take a look at that to be able to provide high-quality, clean material to those companies that need to use those materials in their processes," she said.

Overall, the current of the county's recycling streams aren't swift enough to make recycling affordable. As it rates right now, Archer said, Barry County's low recycling rate wouldn't keep the lights on without some intervention. It would need a shot in the arm or, better yet, more supply. The latter would be accomplished by getting more people to recycle, which is her main goal. Doing that would help create a more self-sustaining and viable business model while reducing net materials entering the landfill.

"We have to increase participation in order to increase the volume of material we're diverting," Archer said. "But the data that I have now does not give us enough to work on."

Archer wasn't able to access data from waste haulers in her report. Analyzing the county's waste stream would have been helpful in establishing a baseline for later comparisons, she said.

Haulers are hesitant to share waste data in order to protect their competitive niche in the market, said Steve Essling, who represents the waste management industry on the solid waste oversight committee.

“[Haulers] do track this information, but it is a competitive marketplace,” he said.

There are three franchise haulers in Hastings, with only two currently seeing use.

Despite haulers' white-knuckled grip on waste data, they are catching on to recycling as a smart business move.

“All the major companies are heading towards zero waste,” Essling said. “But you have the major problems of disposal costs and recycling costs.”

Recycling costs have skyrocketed in the previous decade, he said. Recycling is now poised as a major competitor to traditional waste disposal, with both angling for the same “product” supply.

Waste haulers aren't opposed to recycling, Essling said. They are just opposed to not making enough money.

“We would just as soon not operate landfills and have composting facilities if we could set that business dynamic up to be competitive,” he said. “Sure, I'd love to come back and say that we're going to close the Hastings landfill down ... because we have other options available.”

But for rural counties, options are usually not sustainable in purely profit sense. The journey from the recycling bin to a central processing facility is a long one for rural recyclers. For their urban counterparts, the process is much more efficient, and even profitable for waste haulers.

In speaking with area haulers, Archer said she found transportation costs as the biggest inhibitor to sustainability.

“The cost of taking materials to Grand Rapids was a challenge for them,” she said. “They'd like to see something more local to bring the materials to to help reduce the cost of providing recycling.”

She hypothesized Waste Management partnering with the county in creating a facility for collecting, sorting and compacting recycled materials for shipment to processing centers. Further studies will have to be conducted to determine the best location for such a facility.

“That's how a lot of rural counties and states handle their materials,” Archer said.

Combining recycling programs or creating hauler contracts so everyone pays the same are several immediate options to help lower recycling costs while raising participation.

Many municipal officials Archer contacted expressed willingness to work with one another and even combine their programs to better serve the county's recycling needs and cut costs.

“There are a lot of good models out there, in this county specifically, that I think can benefit from each other,” she said. “Even combining some of those together, we could see some cross-benefit there.”

Drawing from community resources and engagement would see it through the long haul, Archer said. If contracts or bids for recycling services are to be drawn up, the county needs to bring area waste haulers into the conversation.

Another factor to take into consideration is the possibility of requiring residents to change waste haulers in order to be served by recycling.

“Before you spend a lot of time, I would go ahead and put your feelers out to the townships to see if they’re willing to go ahead and take that giant leap,” Essling said.

Nationwide studies suggest not having a recycling receptacle is a major factor keeping people from recycling, Archer said. Providing convenient recycling cartons (preferably sorted by material) would help bridge that gap in Barry County, she said.

Half of the communities with more than 1,000 households have some form of recycling drop-off, according to Archer's report.

“To me, that's the low-hanging fruit, to work together with the alliances that already exist and adding recycling to that conversation,” she said.

Most municipal drop-off facilities struggle with well-intended non-resident recyclers taking advantage of “free” drop-off sites. With pure intentions, non-residents who dip into municipal recycling programs actually hurt the bottom line. Though the trash is diverted from the waste stream, the extra cost is footed by the taxpayers. Archer said she hopes for a system where this phenomenon is no longer the case.

Frank Fiala, who represents the road commission on the solid waste oversight committee, suggested the next step taking Archer's findings to the county board. Building the county's recycling website and launching an educational campaign serve as immediate grassroots steps while the county mulls potential long-term policy.

“The next step now is to get out and start having conversations with each of the townships and local units of government,” Archer said.

Many townships are eager for the leg up Archer can help give their recycling initiatives.

Regina Young, who represents the Barry-Eaton District Health Department, recommended sharing the report with units of government to reach consensus as the program moves forward.