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Recycling centers drop off

Local governments pass on cost to residents by phasing out drop-off sites

For Madison Township resident Chris Ritter, recycling is free and easy.



Duncan Scott/DSScott@News-Herald.com

Gary Holbrook uses a skid steer to load a 6-yard recycling bin into a compactor operated by Dave LaRosa on June 2 at the Madison Township Recycling Site. The men are Madison Township Service Department employees.

Every week, he hauls a trash bag full of empty containers and other materials a half mile south to a township-owned drop-off center behind Madison Fire Station 2.

But he and other township residents might not have that free service next year or even by the end of this year, as Madison Township trustees weigh just how to finance the program that historically has been subsidized by the Lake County landfill.

The county is finishing up the last year of a five-year phase-out process of its Residential Community Recycling Grants.

Ritter has urged his trustees to keep the drop-off site, arguing that if it's gone, more people are just going to dump their recyclables into trash bins.

"It's not a nice-to-have, it's a need-to-have," Ritter told The News-Herald this week. "We need to have recycling."

Over the last four years, community leaders around Lake County have been cutting their drop-off recycling centers for various reasons: either because of the decreased county subsidies, abused usage at the site, movement toward exclusive curbside recycling, or a combination of the three.

Fairport Harbor and Willowick cut their drop-off centers in 2012 and 2013, respectively, and sought bids for curbside recycling for their residents. Painesville Township got rid of its drop-off center on Fairport Nursery Road May 2013, encouraging residents to contract their own curbside recycling pickup. Leroy Township did the same more than three years ago.

Despite the elimination of those sites, municipalities and townships have found other ways for residents to recycle for free, including contracting with Abitibi to collect and recycle paper and cardboard products, which actually generates funding for the community, and setting up sites for residents to drop off empty aluminium cans.

Perry Village, Township cut center

Perry Township and Perry Village are the latest communities to join the list. Their residents had their last day of free recycling June 1 at the shared drop-off center near the township's road garage on Webb Road.

For years, the village and township have been combining their grant dollars to pay for the program, but even with the combined subsidy, the township spent an estimated \$4,000 last year, nearly 15 percent of the program's total cost.

This year, township trustees elected to keep the dropoff site until they ran out of grant funding.

Although money was one major reason for the discontinuation of the drop-off center, abuse was another, with people dumping garbage and big items like toilets and carpet, said Perry Township Solicitor Wally Siegel.

"It was turning into a dump yard," he said, adding that some years ago, the bins were at a couple of sites on Route 20, but needed to be relocated to the road garage so they could be watched over.

To prevent residents from dumping their recyclables into the Lake County Landfill or trash cans, township leaders have been encouraging residents to sign up for curbside recycling with hauling company Universal Disposal — the same company with which Perry Village holds an exclusive curbside contract. The township doesn't negotiate hauling contracts for its residents, but the deal, which Universal submitted through a bid to trustees years ago, offers residents a free 64-gallon recycling container, \$4-per-month curbside recycling, and a \$1 discount if the customer already contracts garbage hauling with Universal, Siegel said.

Lake County's involvement

The county began awarding recycling grants to communities in 2005, spending \$1 million a year, said Tim Gourley, coordinator of the Lake County Solid Waste District.

Despite the large price tag, it was a reduction from the years when the county contracted curbside pickup for residents directly. All of the recycling grant spending was financed through tipping fees from haulers dumping waste at the Lake County Landfill. When the state lowered its caps to the tipping fee from double- to single-digit dollar amounts years later, county commissioners approved a plan to phase out one-fifth of the grant amounts each year for five years.

This year, the pot of county grant money sits at \$186,211.20, and only five communities have applied for their share of the recycling grant, said Matt Armand, public service coordinator for the Lake County Department of Utilities.

No person interviewed for this story has suggested that the county restore the grants, and Lake County Commissioner Daniel Troy said he has heard no one complain about phasing them out.

"We were the only county in the state to pay and manage a recycling program," said Troy, a former state representative and former chairman of the Ohio House's Committee of Solid Waste. "Once people have something, they get upset when you take it away. I could say that 87 other counties had nothing to take away."

He said the landfill facility's decreased revenue needs to be focused on making sure it keeps up with state standards and saves up enough revenue to someday permanently close — a task that would cost \$70 million.

Meanwhile, the Lake County Solid Waste District has a goal it must reach by 2016 to reduce the amount of waste produced by county residents and businesses by 25 percent from its 2009 amounts.

Gourley said despite the district's strong focus on recycling, he doesn't think the phasing out of the landfill grants is going to have "a large impact" on the district meeting that goal.

"As one party has stepped out, more parties have stepped in," Gourley said, referring to communities and residents bidding or contracting curbside recycling.

Gourley said curbside collection has expanded across the county since 2005 when communities had to start their own recycling programs.

Future of recycling drop-off sites

While curbside programs have expanded, community-owned recycling drop-off centers have decreased — with now only a handful existing in Lake County.

The city of Wickliffe is considering closing its recycling drop-off center for next year if City Council approves a comprehensive contract with Kimble Companies to bill customers for curbside pickup of yard waste, garbage and recyclables, said Wickliffe Mayor Bill Margalis. The proposal is in committee with numbers still being worked out. If approved, it would relieve the city's budget from paying \$890,000 per year, passing on those costs to users.

Margalis said the recycling site near Coulby Park on Ridge Road makes up only about \$20,000 of that annual cost.

"I think a lot of the communities have already made the switch to curbside recycling, especially on the west end of the county," Margalis said.

Things are a little different on the east end of the county, however. Although townships can form districts and approve an exclusive hauling bid for curbside pickup, such efforts have proven unpopular in the county's five townships.

Concord Township and Madison Township are the only Lake County townships left that have a recycling program, and leaders of both communities aren't sure if they'll continue through next year.

In Madison Township, workers are compacting and filling a 40-cubic-yard recycling bin at least once a week, which a contractor later hauls to a recycling facility.

"I think people like an easy and free way to (recycle)," Ritter said. "Honestly, I don't think there's a cheaper way than what's being done now."

The drop-off center and its hauling contract are estimated to cost between \$30,000 and \$35,000 a year, Township Administrator Lee Bodnar said. That's a little more than the township spends to maintain four of its five township parks.

But as Ritter points out, that taxpayer cost amounts to between \$1.91 and \$2.23 per resident. Although not a direct comparison, it's a big difference compared with the annual curbside hauling contracts that often cost about \$200.

This year, the township expects to pay \$32,000 for the program, but it will be subsidized with a \$12,501 grant from the county, Bodnar said.

It's 20 percent of what the township received from the county four years ago, and next year it will be zero percent.

While dealing with decreasing funds from the state's Local Government Fund, Bodnar said he questions whether it will be financially feasible to "sustain the services that residents have come to expect."

"We would like to continue it, but I don't think we're financially able to do it," Bodnar said, stressing that it is up to the trustees to make that decision.

Reached by phone this week, Madison Township Trustee Chairman Max Anderson said the recycling drop-off center is a great service, but he said he's very worried about paying for it and is not committed to either reallocating more funds to the site next year or letting it dissolve.

Bodnar said the site is popular among residents, and abuse has diminished over the years.

Concord Township leaders are not seeing the same thing happen at their recycling drop-off center near town hall off Ravenna Road.

In late May, Major Waste Disposal, which contracts with Concord Township to haul the recyclables, welded metal bars between the dropoff bins' openings to prevent people from disposing of large pieces of furniture or garbage. The move follows events of people dumping hazardous waste, kitchen garbage and furniture, officials said.

The recycling program, which includes two 30-cubicyard bins that are not compacted but are hauled more than a couple times a week, costs a little more than \$45,000 a year. This year, the program has a \$14,683 subsidy from the county.

Unlike other townships, Concord Township trustees said they can sustain the program even after the county grant dollars dry up.

But the narrowing field of drop-off venues is building concern for Trustee Chairman Chris Galloway.

"Because everyone has gotten rid of their (recycling drop-off), we have Painesville and Leroy residents dumping their recyclables into our bins," Galloway said this week. "So not only have we had illegal dumping, we're now having nonresidents dumping their volumes here, too, which has increased our volumes and pulls so we've had to pay more... what we're going to do next year, I don't know. I am leaning on getting rid of it."

Galloway said he drops off his recyclables at the site about once every week and he's willing to exchange the free service for paying for his own curbside hauling contract.

Trustee Connie Luhta said when people abuse the service, "It might be time to stop doing it here and make them do curbside because it's not any more expensive than just getting trash hauling.

"The trash haulers have made it attractive in price," Luhta said.

Trustee Chairman Paul Malchesky said the township has "shown a significant commitment" to encouraging residents to contract private curbside recycling, but also calls the drop-off site a "worthwhile endeavor." She said she would like to maintain a free recycling drop-off service for the community in some way. Similar to Galloway, Malchesky said he would like to see a more regionally focused recycling drop-off

center.

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"That drop-off spot may not be where it is now — it may go somewhere else and be in conjunction with another entity," Malchesky said.

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