

What's Up! Magazine

Towards Zero Waste: Businesses reduce waste

Posted by [Melanie Merz](#) on June 13, 2010

Patrons at Mallard's Ice Cream place their trash, and food and paper waste into separate containers. Mallard's is just one of many businesses reducing their waste. Photo by Melanie Merz

Alright, so which bin does this go in? To live in Bellingham and not have stood perplexed over three bins, with a grease stained paper plate in one hand and a waxed paper cup in the other, probably means that you haven't been out of the house in a few years. By taking a moment to read the bin labels and figure out which one to toss your dinner scraps into, you've played a role in Sustainable Connection's Toward Zero Waste (TZW) program.

Completely eliminating waste requires tremendous dedication; but reducing waste thrown into trashcans by 50-80 percent is actually relatively easy. The goal of TZW is "to reduce the amount of waste going to the landfill, increase reuse and recycling of existing resources, and increase purchasing of recycled and environmentally preferable products."



Since TZW kicked off three years ago, over 200 local businesses have signed on pledging to reduce their waste by at least 50 percent. Sustainable Connections' partner in the TZW initiative is recycling and waste collection company Sanitation Services Company (SSC).

When a business commits to move towards zero waste, it receives a slew of informational guidelines and marketing materials from Sustainable Connections, and a "waste audit" conducted by SCC's Rodd Pemble. The waste audit has been critical for measuring the success of the program by helping businesses understand the initial magnitude of their waste, and to see the results of their TZW participation.

"The first thing a business needs to know is where the opportunities for waste reduction are," explains Pemble. The single largest stream of waste for most businesses is paper, even if there is already a recycling program in place. Second is compostables: food scraps, food soiled

paper, and yard waste. Pemble says that people aversion to food composting is their fear of the yuck factor. "People imagine that they're going to have a pig sty in their cafeteria when they have a food recycling bin, but the same materials have been going into the garbage can. The other thing is that most adults eat their food, leaving behind only the paper packaging. There's not much of a yuck factor in coffee cups and paper plates. Elementary schools are another story."

Tissue and paper towels can also go in the food bins, so many businesses use compostable bags to collect paper products in restrooms. Another recyclable that most people aren't aware of is shrink wrap. The thin plastic packaging (always a hassle to break DVDs out of) is so light it generally doesn't need to be hauled away, but can be dropped off at NW Recycling.

"It took us two tries to get it off the ground," says Boundary Bay general manager Janet Lightner. Along with employee incredulousness, an early problem was the unavailability of compostable products like corn starch straws. "At first we had to pick out all the non-compostables. The tediousness of separating things when you are bussing tables while it's busy was hard. Now that more products are available, it's much simpler. Everything can go in one bin." Lightner mentioned that as the idea of TZW gained momentum around town, employees were more open to it. "Employee training was tough, but now it's entrenched." Boundary can boast 100 employees committed to zero waste, and 56,000 pounds of waste composted in one year.

The types of businesses participating in TZW run the gamut of Whatcom County's offerings: restaurants, architects, manufacturers, retail stores. As the TZW logo appears on more signs and windows, people are beginning to realize that significantly reducing waste is achievable. "This program has produced really big results. That success is driven by the members," says Sustainable Connections' April Claxton. "We have a couple workshops each year where people get together to ask questions. Peer-to-peer sharing is very useful." Once the most obvious steps are taken, people seek other means to minimize waste, often working with their suppliers and clients. "It's a ripple effect."

Take a minute to picture how much trash you generate each week. Then imagine the scale of waste that a city accumulates. Now consider that, with just a little extra effort, all of that waste could be cut in half. Instead of piling up in landfills, our food scraps are composted and turned into soil for local farms and parks. It's incredible, and absolutely worth taking those extra seconds in front of the bins to read the signs.

Towards Zero Waste @ home

Rodd Pemble's No. 1 tip: head to a thrift store to pick up a simple stainless steel cooking pot. It will cost you a dollar. Toss in all your food scraps (clam shells, salmon bits, food soiled paper products the high volume composting can handle pretty much everything). It fills up in a couple of days, forcing you to dump it in the food recycling bin regularly, and has a lid so you don't have to look at it. Metal pots also don't soak up odor and are easy to wash out. If you drink milk out of a carton, you can use that to collect food recycling as well, and then toss the whole container in the food recycling bin.

Check out www.ssc-inc.com for complete lists of recyclables.