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RECYCLING REALITY:

There is no magic land of “Away”

On a cloudy, blustery day in May, a group of intrepid Leaguers gathered at the City of Santa Cruz Resource Recover Center on Dimeo Lane to take a tour and learn about recycling first-hand from Leslie O’Malley, waste reduction assistant.

The average person throws away 4.5 pounds of material per day, says O’Malley, but really, there is no magic land of “away” where this material disappears. O’Malley introduced us to some new ways of thinking about waste reduction, especially the fourth “R”. We are all familiar with the concepts of “reduce, reuse, and recycle”, but she also encouraged us to refuse to buy items that can’t be recycled and to choose instead those that can.

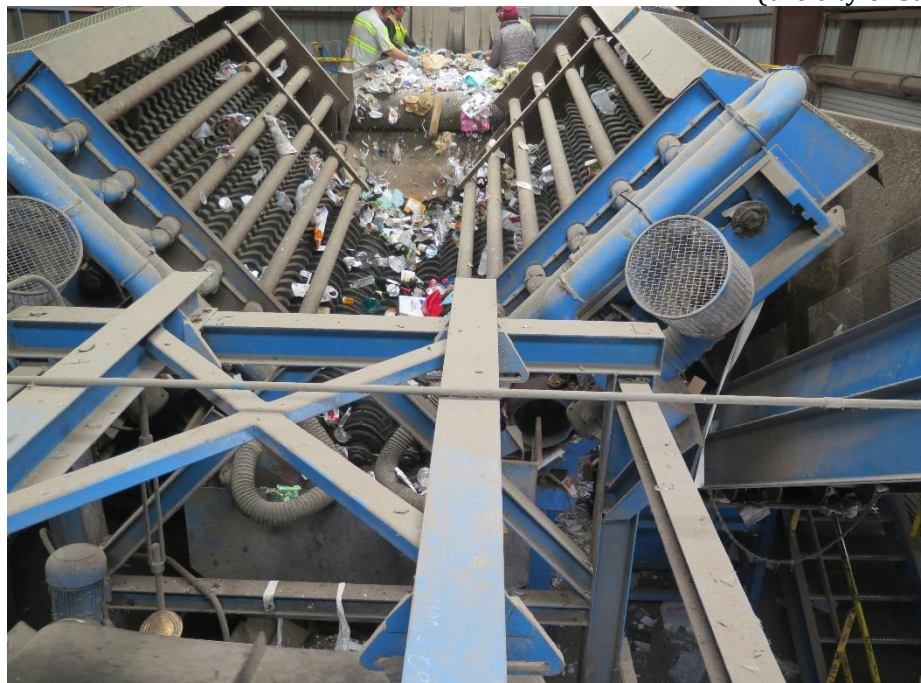
Make a conscious choice at the store about the material you choose: aluminum, glass, and cardboard instead of plastic and Styrofoam. Go bigger instead of smaller (less packaging). Look for

eggs, berries, and produce in cardboard cartons instead of plastic. Where those options don’t exist, demand them from your retailer. O’Malley emphasized being an educated recycler, not a wish-cycler who says, “I don’t know if this is recyclable or not, so I’ll just toss it in and let them figure it out.” Keep in mind that much of the sorting is done by manual labor working on a conveyor belt, and it’s time consuming to remove trash from the recycling.



Aluminum is the recycling star.

Check to see what can be recycled in your area (the city of Santa Cruz accepts different items than the county; see sidebar for information on how to find out what’s recyclable where you live). Know what the most recyclable materials are. Aluminum is a star recyclable; it can be recycled endlessly without any loss of quality and is also the most profitable, bringing in \$2000/ton, compared to plastic bags at \$5/ton. Steel comes in a close second. Rinsed cans can go straight into the recycle bin; it’s no longer necessary to crush cans for recycling.



Initial sort of material at the V-screen. Workers pick out the non-recyclables. The screen sorts out different materials.

Glass, paper and cardboard recycle well, but contamination can be a problem. Ceramics, window glass, drinking glasses, perfume bottles, light bulbs (fluorescent lights are hazardous waste; see sidebar for information), and Pyrex glass are not recyclable and should be thrown in the trash. Paper can

only be recycled a limited number of times. Cardboard should be clean, and all non-cardboard parts (such as Styrofoam, packing materials, or plastic inserts) should be removed. Only clean pizza boxes (tear them in half or leave them open so it's easy for workers to see they are clean) can be recycled. Soiled cardboard pizza boxes can be torn up and put in your compost. Products that are made of mixed materials (think potato chip cans) are not recyclable.

Plastics, while nominally recyclable, are problematic in many ways. The city of Santa Cruz is moving away from recycling plastic by numbers (the resin codes in the "recycle" triangle marked on plastic items); they now accept only certain specific plastic items for recycling: bottles, jugs, jars, and tubs (such as yogurt or sour cream tubs). Be sure to clean plastic containers; put caps back on bottles and lids on tubs, as they are too small for the processing equipment. Plastic clamshells used for produce and packaging, plastic strawberry baskets, aseptic juice boxes, plastic dinnerware, and paper cartons are all trash. Remember, don't be a wish-cycler: when in doubt, throw it out. (See sidebar for more information.)

Santa Cruz County has taken a different route and accepts other types of plastic (check their list; see sidebar). They don't currently have markets for all the recyclables they accept, but hope to find them in the future. County recyclables are trucked to San Jose where they are processed in a much larger facility that is able to accommodate a wider variety of material. Because of the larger volume,



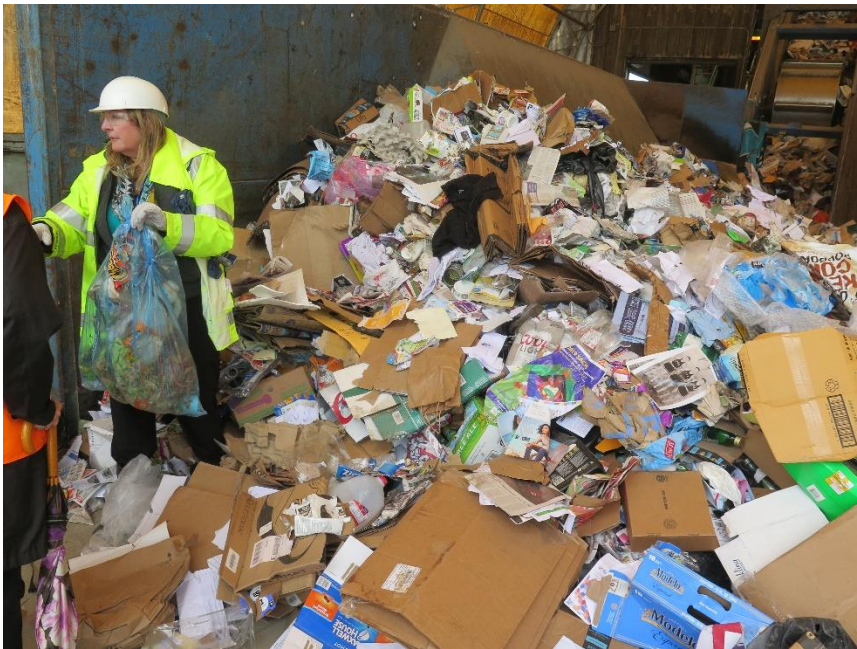
Leslie O'Malley displays plastic insulation with faulty recycling information.

they are able to find markets for types of plastic that aren't available to smaller facilities.

Unfortunately, it seems we are still in the wild west with regard to plastic resin codes, and manufacturers aren't held to a standard. O'Malley gave one striking example of an insulating wrapper used to pack prepared meals. The insulation is printed with feel-good messages: "Packaging made from recycled water bottles!" "Place me in your curbside recycling bin!" and a big "recycle" triangle with the number "1". Unfortunately, in reality, no one is recycling materials made from recycled plastics, and the instructions to "Place me in your curbside recycling bin!" are wrong if you live in Santa Cruz.



Recycling sorted, bundled and ready to go. Large colored plastic, plastic bags, steel cans, aluminum.



Leslie O'Malley finds bag of garbage in the recycling on the tipping floor.

O'Malley tracked down the manufacturer of the insulation and questioned them about their faulty recycling instructions. They told her they hope that if they put enough of this in the recycling stream, "someone" will figure out what to do with it. Unfortunately, that's not happening, but in the meantime, this misleading information lets consumers feel good about their product while causing trouble for recycling facilities.

Plastic bags come with their own set of issues. In order to tell if a plastic bag is recyclable, it must be stretchy and not make a noisy, crinkly sound. Potato chip bags? Not recyclable. Pet food bags? Nope (but you can reuse them as garbage bags). Collect your clean, dry recyclable bags inside one of the larger bags and tie it closed. Plastic sheeting should also be bagged (long items will jam the sorting equipment). The other issue with plastic bags, says O'Malley, is that, while they can be recycled, and we want to support that, we now know that microfibers from polar fleece, socks, and other items made from recycled bags migrate to the ocean and add to plastic pollution there. We have solved one problem and created another.

The other problem with plastic is contamination with the wrong type of plastic or other contaminants. Until recently, China, who bought most of our plastic, accepted 10% contamination. Now they have enacted a new

policy called China National Sword, and will only accept plastic if contamination is under .05% (yes, that's five hundredths of a percent), which eliminates most post-consumer plastics. Some of the clear plastics the facility collects are being sent to a plant in Lodi, California, to be made into Trex lumber. O'Malley believes we are now in a "hiccup" with regard to plastic recycling, and that eventually better recycling options will be available.

Large, colorful plastic items such as plastic toys, broken lawn furniture, old recycling bins, and plastic nursery pots can be brought to the recycling center (do not put in your cart). Plastic appliances are not recyclable.

Propane gas containers may be metal, but they are dangerous in the recycling bin or trash bin and have caused fires in trucks when they get compacted. CO2 cartridges are too small

to recycle. The two materials that workers on the sorting lines most hate to see are diapers (really, who does this?) and syringes. O'Malley asked us to think about the human workers (we aren't yet to the point of having robots sort our trash) who will be sorting through what you put in your recycle bin: a metal saw blade is hazardous waste and does not belong there.



Mountain of metal waits to be recycled.

The other item that is never recyclable is garbage. Sadly, some folks who run out of room in their trash bins use the recycle cart as overflow. As we were looking at the “tipping floor” where the recycling process starts, O’Malley didn’t have to look long to discover a bag of trash that was put in with someone’s recycling.

Once you understand what belongs in the bin, it’s time to look at what you can do to avoid filling up your trash can and the landfill. Working appliances, electronics, and other useful items can be donated to Grey Bears, Goodwill, or other organizations (see sidebar). Clothing, blankets, linens, stuffed toys, and other usable items should be donated and don’t belong in the recycle bin or the landfill. O’Malley stopped by the gigantic “mountain of metal” composed of countless discarded metal objects and pointed out many items that could have been donated instead of being thrown away.

Find ways to reduce and refuse: have your own supply of reusable bags, water bottles, and mugs. Create a zero-waste kit for eating out with reusable utensils, metal straw, cloth napkin, and reusable containers for leftovers. Be creative and think about what can be upcycled through arts and crafting.

Diverting materials where possible to extend the life of the landfill is a key charge for the facility. They lose money on many items; only aluminum cans are big money makers. Some materials they have to pay to get rid of. Others cost more to process than they make selling it.

As an example of looking beyond the cart, O’Malley pointed to a company that accepts old tennis balls and reuses them to make tennis courts (see sidebar). The city even has a program to use trash as art. She encouraged everyone to be informed and to use the power of their voice to refuse and rethink. “We have to get out of the thinking that recycling is only the convenience of the blue curbside cart,” says O’Malley, “We need to look for other ways to recycle.”

—Pam Newbury, Santa Cruz VOTER Editor

This article was originally published in the [August 2019 VOTER Newsletter](#) published by the League of Women Voters of Santa Cruz County. The newsletter can be viewed online at lwvsc.org/voter Learn more about the League at lwvsc.org.

A video of the presentation this article is based on can be viewed at lwvsc.org/videos.html

RECYCLING RESOURCES

>City of Santa Cruz Resource Recovery:

cityofsantacruz.com

>[Easy curbside recycling guide](#) (Santa Cruz). A printable flyer you can post near your recycle bin for quick reference.

>["What goes where?" Recycling Guide](#) A highly useful interactive recycling guide. Type in the material and find out how to dispose of it. While the recycling information is specific to the city, the guide includes great suggestions and tips on reusing, refusing, and rethinking.

>This [video](#) shows the Santa Cruz City recycling facility operations, including how the V-screen operates (note that some of the recycling information is out of date).

>Want to see the facility for yourself? Sign up for a tour at cityofsantacruz.com. You may even want to become a master recycler and help educate others.

>**Santa Cruz County Recycling** information and guides dpw.co.santa-cruz.ca.us

>An [A to Z guide](#) to county recycling and waste reduction.

>**Mattresses and box springs** are accepted at the Resource Recovery Facility free of charge. For [information](#) about the curbside bulky item pickup program call (831) 420-5220 (City of Santa Cruz only). The same applies to county facilities (see the above guide for more info). Learn more at byebyemattress.com

>**Tennis ball recycling:** tennisballcourts.com

>**Take back the light:** [fluorescent light take-back program](#).

>**Grey Bears** accepts electronics and some appliances as well as Styrofoam. For complete information see their website. They have centers in Santa Cruz (Chanticleer), Ben Lomond (Newell Creek), and Watsonville (Buena Vista). They refurbish computers and other electronics and appliances. Check their website for more information about what items they accept. Greybears.org

>**Goodwill** has donations centers throughout the county in Scotts Valley, Santa Cruz Capitola, Aptos, and Watsonville. See the Goodwill Central Coast website for more information. ccgoodwill.org

>**Best Buy** has bins in their stores for many kinds of e-waste, including cables and wires. bestbuy.com