The Patriot Ledger

Date: Thursday, January 31, 2008
Location: QUINCY, MA
Circulation (DMA): 64,935 (7)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (D)
Page: 20
Keyword: Massachusetts Bar Association

A real paper chase: Too good for the trash

SPEAK OUT

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Cut down eight or nine trees. Chip wood. Fire up boilers. Pressure cook chips in lye for a few hours. Transform the equivalent of 120 gallons of fuel into a ton and a half of carbon dioxide. Acid wash with lots of water. Bleach if needed, and dry.

That's the recipe for making the half-ton of paper and cardboard that the average American (you and I) consumes each year from scratch. The sour stench downwind of pulping plants tells you they're belching more than just carbon dioxide.

After one use, more than half of our paper products get chucked in the trash. Burned or buried. Oxidized or reduced to carbon dioxide or its evil twin, methane. Massachusetts cities, towns, colleges, hospitals, businesses – you and I – pay an average of $77 a ton for this.

Meanwhile, paper mills here and abroad need to keep their plants running to feed our insatiable appetite. It's much more efficient to make new paper from old paper than from wood. No trees, boilers, lye or acid. Just water to make paper soup. So they're paying big bucks for waste paper, often more than we pay to throw it away. The lowest grade of baled paper, #6 News, is fetching more than $65 a ton here. Cardboard is now worth $110.

Here in Massachusetts, the Newark Group operates 100 percent-recycled paperboard mills in Haverhill and Fitchburg. They turn mostly residential waste paper and undeliverable mail into products such as cereal boxes, Scrabble and Monopoly boards, book covers, including the latest Harry Potter, and the like.

Rand-Whitney, part of the Kraft Group, makes corrugated boxes, egg crates and other containers in Worcester from corporate discards.

So go figure: In Massachusetts, the paper and cardboard we waste each year could fill Fenway Park to the height of the Prudential Center. More than 1.5 million tons. We pay more than $100 million a year to dispose of it. And that "waste" paper is worth about another $100 million. What's wrong with this picture?

We've gotten into some bad consumer habits. It's too easy for us to get stuff, blissfully unaware of how it's made, then throw it in the trash, oblivious to where it goes. It's time to pay attention to what we're doing, for our own good. For our economy, for our air and water, our climate, our kids. Like budgets, the Earth and its atmosphere have limits.

MassRecycle, the state's recycling coalition, has launched a campaign to give waste paper the respect it deserves. Last fall, "Mass Recycles Paper!" kicked off at the Springfield Material Recycling Facility. Gov. Patrick proclaimed the date "Massachusetts Recycles Paper Day." The goal and challenge to the state's residents, businesses and institutions is to get a million tons of paper a year out of the trash.

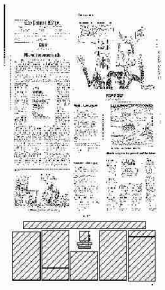
Last year, the Springfield plant supplied more than 30,000 tons of residential paper from 78 towns to Massachusetts mills, and paid those towns more than $1 million for their recyclables.

Since municipal budgets will benefit from its success, more than 150 mayors and selectmen boards in the state have already signed a resolution to support the campaign in both word and deed.

The Wall Street Journal noted that the average household that recycles well reduces its carbon footprint by 10 percent.

And Massachusetts Bar Association President David White Jr. recently exhorted members to "make the practice of law the most environmentally friendly business in Massachusetts." Among his green guidelines: minimize printing, use recycled paper and recycle diligently.

Did you make a New Year's resolution?



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Pledging to reduce, reuse and recycle as much paper as you can, at home, at work, and at school can be a lot easier than going on a diet. If you aren't in the habit yet, just put a bag or extra container next to all your trash cans, and put all your clean paper into them. Window envelopes, lottery tickets, paper clips can all go in now.

To learn what kinds of paper can be recycled, see if your town leaders signed the resolution, and much more, go to www.MassRecyclesPaper.org.

As the Rowe Elementary School students in Springfield sang at the kickoff, "It isn't really trash till you mix it all together."

Claire Sullivan is executive director of the 15-town South Shore Recycling Cooperative. She has served on the Board of MassRecycle since 2001, and was president from 2005-07.

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