

THE GREEN PAGES

Workplace recycling helps give old paper fresh currency



By RUTH HEIL
Business Journal Columnist

We've reached an age when it is no longer socially acceptable to throw a good piece of paper into a landfill.

As a result, much of the paper you use contains a combination of cut trees and collected waste. Some — the stuff marked with a 100 percent post-consumer label — was made entirely from recycled trash.

THE GREEN SCENE

Paper-making in America was once a recycling process in itself. Rags were shredded into pulp until the early 1800s, when wood chips became the common ingredient.

Today, curbside pickups, fundraising collections and government-mandated municipal actions have raised awareness about the value of this resource, and it's estimated that we recycle more than half the paper we discard. Reusing fiber to make paper, a centuries-old process, remains the prudent option for both environment and balance sheet.

First, the used paper is filtered through a screen or centrifuge to remove dirt and metal. Then, ink is washed away with surfactants and soap. Finally the material is turned into a slurry pulp, closely mirroring the batch made from virgin wood, albeit of

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a somewhat lower quality. Paper cannot be recycled endlessly. Each time it's processed, the tiny fibers become shorter, and like thread counts in a bed sheet, the smaller the fiber, the poorer the quality.

Therefore, a concoction of virgin wood and recycled material is mixed based on the quality requirement of the final product. For instance, toilet paper need not be fine like writing paper. Low-grade paper can be used for newsprint, coffee filters, paper towels, packing material, etc.

Just as the industry has improved its recycling capacity, America has increased what it recovers. Paper recovery rates are measured and reported annually by the Environmental Protection Agency based on how much waste municipalities collect and where it is sent. In 2010, America generated 250 million tons of trash, about 70 million of which was paper and paperboard, and more than 60 percent of that was recycled. Each ton of recycled mixed paper can save



An unidentified man tosses used paper into a Paper Retriever bin at Red Hill Borough's municipal recycling center. Photo by Ruth Heil

the energy equivalent of 165 gallons of gasoline or 3.3 cubic yards of landfill space. The benefits of diverting paper from the landfill are significant because landfills generate greenhouse gases. They release methane (CH₄), which is more than 20 times as effective as carbon dioxide (CO₂) at trapping heat in the atmosphere. Since paper makes up 29 percent of municipal solid waste, more than any other material that Americans throw away, it remains a high priority for recycling.

Meanwhile, the controversy over recycling seems as old as paper. Some argue for reducing consumption; others contend the chemicals used to wash away ink or the miles driven to collect the paper outweigh recycling's benefits; loggers point out that forests are a renewable resource, the profitability of which has resulted in millions of acres of standing timber; and then there's shortened fiber issue.

It's true that the vision of a paperless society has blurred; surfactants do nasty things to the ecosystem; and the proper ecological management of our forests can be found via certifications such as the Forest Stewardship Council's FSC label. However, the mindset that a recycling bin is a better tool to harvest material than a chainsaw has transformed the supply chain.

It is more convenient for paper mills near urban places such as the Lehigh Valley to use recycled material in the manufacturing process since virgin fiber generally comes from multi-million-acre forests. Plus, office paper, with its long and illustrious fiber, is a credible resource. Because of these two factors, your trash is in demand.

Fund drives through collections such as the yellow-and-green Paper Retriever bins seen outside some local libraries or nonprofit

organizations are proof. This service from Resolute Forest Products (formerly known as AlibitBoWater) has been generating

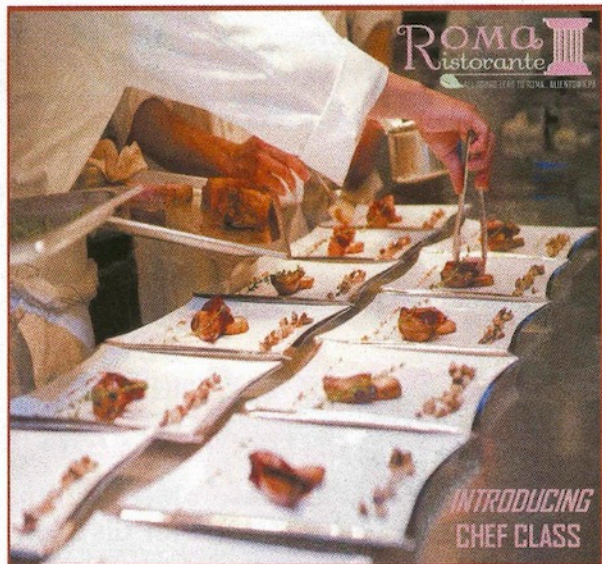
money for Lehigh Valley nonprofits since 2005.

Through its EcoRewards program, Resolute helps small businesses, too, cutting expenses through the reduction of fees related to carrying paper or cardboard to the dump.

"A properly set up recycling system can save on the money local businesses spend on their waste hauling," says Melinda Antell, EcoRewards' regional manager. "Typically up to 75 percent of a small business' waste is recyclable material. If this material goes into the EcoRewards recycling bin, then the business should be able to reduce the frequency of their trash pickup."

EcoRewards is not the only option, and the service does not reach into all corners of the valley. Other recyclers offer services; however, almost all start with a waste audit which typically requires only a few minutes to accomplish. More information is available at www.EcoRewards.com. You can also test your paper-recycling IQ or download a guide for workplace recycling via the American Forest & Paper Association's www.paperrecycles.org website. However you approach it, it is no longer financially acceptable to pay a trash hauler to deliver a good piece of paper to the dump.

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