



The challenging problems of trash

Topics and issues for long range planning ...



We must plan for next-generation trash solutions

According to the 2013 Ten-Year Solid Waste Management Plan produced by the AA County Department of Public Works, the only open landfill in the County, the Millersville landfill, is projected to reach its limiting capacity in 2041. Planning and permitting of disposal sites like Millersville can take 10-15 years, so that trash generation and processing is an issue that must be addressed by our strategic planning and by Plan2040, the new GDP.

The scope of the problem is large. About 350,000 tons of solid waste is produced by Anne Arundel County residents every year. In 2013, about 23% of this was recycled by a private contractor, about 20% composted, approximately 37% was sent out of county for disposal, and 20% sent to the Millersville landfill. The portion sent to the landfill, even when highly compacted, would fill an area the size of a football field to the height of a seven-story building. And nearly twice that much was exported out of the County.

To further complicate matters, the market for recycled trash has contracted significantly. Until recently a significant fraction of domestic recycled trash was exported to China. But [in 2018, China stopped buying most of U.S. recyclable trash](#), claiming that it was too contaminated for cost-effective reuse. The recycled plastics market was particularly hard hit. U.S. recycling processors were forced to raise their prices to the point that plastic recycling became prohibitively expensive for many cities.

Plastic materials recycled domestically are usually more expensive than those made from raw feedstock like oil and natural gas, and they are particularly challenging to recycle, thanks to the variety of additives and blends used to manufacture a wide array of products. They are difficult to sort, and each type is sensitive to contamination from almost any other material when attempts are made at reuse. As a consequence, only nine percent of the plastic produced in the U.S. is recycled. The remainder ends up in landfills, incinerators, or floating free and polluting the environment.

Waste-to-energy conversion, or trash incineration, is used by a number of municipalities to reduce landfill volumes. However, burning trash to generate power is controversial in the U.S. Often incinerators are located near disadvantaged neighborhoods and are suspected of creating a wide range of air pollution and health problems. In Europe a [new generation of incinerators](#) is changing the perception of trash incineration, but much controversy remains.

Perhaps the best approach to reducing the waste disposal problem lies in minimizing waste production, and plastic waste should be a prime target. Half of all plastic produced goes into single use items, so that bans on single use plastic bags, cups, straws, utensils, and food containers and generally reducing the use of plastic in retail packaging could have a large impact on difficult-to-recycle plastic waste. The City of

Annapolis and the State of Maryland are currently considering legislation that would ban single-use plastic bags at the point of sale and require retailers to charge for paper bags, in an effort to reverse reliance on single-use packaging. These are steps in the right direction, as is the County's new ban on Styrofoam packaging.

Recycling and reduction of landfill wastes are topics of high current interest in almost every metropolitan area in the United States and Europe. As might be expected, leaders have emerged who offer examples that may be useful to study. [San Francisco, CA](#), is thought to be one of the leaders in the U.S. The city ultimately aims to reach zero waste. That means recycling, composting, reusing, and reducing consumption so that nothing goes to either the landfill or incineration. In Europe, Ljubljana, Slovenia is one of the leaders. A [Ljubljana case study](#) shows that its per capita generation of landfill waste is only about 1/3 that of Anne Arundel County.

Our County should strive to be a leader in waste management and reduction. Exporting our waste is not a responsible solution. We must reduce our waste at the source, sort it more efficiently, compost and recycle a larger fraction, and, finally, place the remainder in well-designed landfills that can be capped for beneficial uses like solar power generation. It's a challenge that requires long-term planning and clearly deserves inclusion in Plan2040.

Comment on Land Use Change Applications

Land Use Change Applications for the new GDP can be viewed at the [Plan2040 website](#). Changing the Land Use designation is the first step toward rezoning of a property. Comments on each application can be made by clicking on the relevant property in the Land Use Change Application viewer. The comment period is open through March 13.

About the Alliance

The Anne Arundel Alliance for Livable Communities is a non-partisan coalition of 25 local and state organizations advocating for sustainable growth and environmental protections to safeguard and enhance residents' quality of life.

Anne Arundel Alliance for Livable Communities



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