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MOVIN' ON UP –

*STRATEGIES FOR INCREASING
MULTIFAMILY RECYCLING*

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

As single family (SF) recycling programs have “matured”, communities are turning their attention to increasing multifamily (MF) recycling. Although there may be significant economies of scale in materials and collection, recycling in multifamily buildings poses complexities – in particular, related to incentives, logistics, staffing, and other difficulties. Many of these challenges are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Difficulties in Multifamily Recycling
(source: SERA, Inc., 1999)

Incentives:

- Landlords, not tenant generators, pay garbage bills
- Buildings on smallest dumpsters usually can't save money
- Recycling not always “free” from commercial haulers so total solid waste management bills may increase when buildings recycle
- Landlords include the cost of “average” garbage in the rent, so tenants may get no savings from recycling individually and rents are not likely to be adjusted for recycling savings
- No incentives to recycle “more”, even if recycling takes place

Logistics, Quality, Other:

- Recycling can be less convenient for residents than taking out the garbage
- Takes more space -- space for recycling is often not planned into the building, or additional dumpsters/containers would take up valuable parking spaces
- Containers are “shared”, so it is difficult to see who does and doesn't put out garbage and recyclables
- Contamination is more difficult to trace
- Takes more labor for janitorial staff, etc.
- On-site “monitoring” and education often needed

¹ Thanks to the members of the Seattle Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC), of which the author is a member, for discussions on this topic. Special thanks to Susan Appel of Nuts and Bolts Recycling, and to Bob Rust, Jane Johnson, and Nancy Malaret for helpful suggestions and discussions.

As part of a recent research report funded and completed by SERA, we explored and developed a variety of strategies with promise for increasing MF recycling. The project involved:

- A review of the literature,
- Interviews with multifamily recyclers and equipment suppliers,
- Interviews with communities across the nation, and
- An analysis of in-house program information and data on multifamily recycling from SERA's database of programs in 1,100 communities nationwide.

The good news is that recent developments – both in hardware and incentives – may help communities increase recycling in the multi-family sector. The strategies we developed are listed in Table 2 and described in the paragraphs below. Note that many of the strategies may also be very applicable for increasing recycling in the commercial sector, another priority sector necessary for helping meet recycling goals in many communities.

Table 2: Strategies for Increasing MF Recycling

Incentives

- 1) Two-tier rates / "recycling credits"
 - for all MF buildings, or
 - only for low-use MF customers, or
 - for buildings assigning on-site recycling "champions".
- 2) Direct tenant bill incentives (through other utilities)
- 3) Hauler incentives

Mandates

- 4) Requiring recycling plans of building owners
- 5) Require space for recycling in new and remodeled MF buildings
- 6) Require recycling in tenant leases

Hardware Options

- 7) Encourage / publicize "hardware" solutions that make recycling as convenient as garbage

Tailored and Traditional Approaches

- 8) Tailored approaches to address building-specific barriers
- 9) Traditional approaches including outreach, centralized drop-off recycling, recycling containers near garbage containers, etc.

SERA, 1999.



B. Developing Strategies to Provide Incentives for MF Recycling

Communities have set aggressive recycling goals, and, in the author's opinion, economic or variable rate incentives have been important components to the success of SF recycling. For that reason, we wanted to try to develop practical methods for providing economic signals or incentives for MF tenants if possible.

Certainly, MF garbage rates are volume-based (charged by volume and collection frequency), and provide financial incentives for decreasing disposal. However, unlike variable rates (or Pay as you Throw) in the SF sector, these rates are paid by the building, not the individual tenant generators. Getting the incentive to the tenant has been the MF sector's special difficulty.

Economic signals can be some of the most effective methods for encouraging desirable behavior because they:

- Are direct,
- Provide pocketbook incentives for positive behavior changes,
- Are equitable,
- Allow flexibility and do not limit choices – they do not “outlaw” behaviors, just charge more for less desirable actions,
- Encourage/allow creativity in reducing waste,
- Are relatively easily enforced, among other benefits.

Each of the economic signals/strategies, as well as the mandatory approaches, hardware solutions, and tailored approaches developed as part of this research effort are described in Section II.

II. STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING MF RECYCLING

The nine strategies (and variations / options) identified for increasing recycling in the multi-family sector are described below.

1) Two-Tiered Rates in Multifamily Buildings

Early on, some cities implemented “recycling credits”, or essentially two-tiered rates for single family recycling. Single family households could receive a credit or rebate on their bill if they were determined to be “recyclers” – defined as (presumably active) participants in the City’s curbside recycling program. Some cities² have considered extending this type of concept to the multifamily sector – providing lower garbage rates for those buildings that “recycle” compared to those that don’t.

In this approach, buildings that meet the criteria developed for “recycling” would pay lower garbage rates at each garbage service level than those that do not. Concerns about implementing two-tiered rates in the multifamily sector include:

- **Defining “participation”:** In order to be fair to other ratepayers (who are paying for the credit) and to provide encouragement for recycling, a definition of what constitutes a “participating” building needs to be established. Some possible criteria are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Criteria for Defining a “Participating” MF Building

Potential criteria for defining which buildings could be considered “participants” for the purposes of receiving a lower rate might include:

- Recycling program is available and includes at least a set number of materials
 - Tonnage is sufficient enough to meet thresholds based on number of units
 - Contamination is below (and stays below) an established threshold
 - Building has adequate recycling education program for new and existing tenants
 - Some communities might wish to require on-site recycling champions; others may not.
- **Encouraging “more” recycling, not just threshold levels:** With one level of “credit” provided as a reward for meeting one level of threshold recycling, there is no financial incentive for recycling “more” vs. less. If this is a concern, communities could “ramp up” the criteria and the incentive over time to provide continual encouragement, or could establish different levels – one star vs. two star recycling buildings, etc. However, the administrative and enforcement complexities may not warrant this enhancement.³

² For example, Seattle recently considered (but rejected) implementing two-tiered rates – lower garbage rates for “recycling” multifamily buildings than for non-recycling buildings.

³ Better yet might be direct tenant savings through rent reductions if and as building owners pay less for garbage service, but this may not be very likely in reality. The best solution would be some method of providing truly variable rates or Pay as you Throw on an individual tenant basis, but without very complicated monitoring and hardware changes, this will be unlikely.

- **Revenue concerns and forecasting uncertainties:** It can be difficult to determine 1) how big an incentive is needed to encourage recycling; and 2) reactions of customers to these rate changes, which could lead to revenue shortfalls. However, if this sector is a priority, this should not be a barrier. There are many tested research techniques that SERA and other economics firms have used to gauge the level of incentive needed and the likely reactions to different financial incentives. These can be used to develop appropriate rates and “bound” financial risk.
- **Administrative issues:** Communities need to consider a number of city-specific issues. How should buildings that can’t recycle because of space, zoning, etc. be treated? How many exemptions are too many? What about buildings that participate but have contamination problems?
- **Equity issues:** MF buildings that receive similar amounts of garbage service currently pay the same. This would change under two-tiered rates. An incentive is currently provided through the garbage rates, which charge more for more service, and buildings can save money by recycling (assuming they can “move down a can”). A few communities have had concerns about the fact that those who don’t use recycling pay for this “free” program⁴ through their garbage rates, and so non-users get a “double-whammy” – paying for the program and for higher garbage rates.

Although the two-tier rate has some difficulties, it is essential to introduce improved financial incentives to realize significant increases in recycling in the MF sector. Despite difficulties, two-tiered rates might be considered, especially if the alternative is:

- *To provide no incentives, or*
- *To use only outreach or traditional approaches for increasing recycling in the MF sector.*

If widespread “recycling credits” for multifamily buildings are considered too big a risk for the community, two variations on this approach can be considered to help limit the risk.

- **Variation 1: Modified Two-tier Rates – Limited to Low Use Customers:** One concern is that buildings on the smallest containers have virtually no incentive to recycle, because they cannot reduce garbage service levels and save money. One possibility is to provide limited two-tiered rates – making them available only to those customers on the smallest container size that recycle. This often is a fairly common service level, so the revenue impacts could be fairly high if a reasonable incentive / discount is provided. However, the fact that there are many customers on this service level is exactly the point – they need an incentive and there are many of them.
- **Variation 2: Discounts for On-site “Champions”:** Many communities find that recycling contamination is lower and participation is higher in buildings that have on-site champions – either on-site building managers or a motivated tenant. These champions help educate tenants, including new move-ins, help monitor the contamination, distribute or collect containers in some cases, and other duties to help make recycling “work” in the multifamily

⁴ In this discussion, we assume recycling is available to MF for no additional fee – the way it is provided by many community programs. The discussion would differ for service providers that charge separately for recycling service.

building. Some communities are offering lower garbage fees – through discounts or credits – for those buildings that for those assign these “champions”.

2) Direct Tenant Incentives – Credits on Other Bills

One strategy that shows considerable promise for communities that handle solid waste and energy (or water) service includes providing credits on “other” bills to tenants that are in recycling buildings. The difficulty in the multifamily sector is that garbage bills go to the *owners* of large buildings, not to the *tenants*. If financial incentives could be provided directly to tenants, they could be encouraged to recycle – and to continue recycling.

For communities that have municipal service – and/or have access to water or electric bills – credits or discounts could be provided on individual water or electric bills for tenants in buildings that meet the criteria for MF “recycling”. Although the size of the credit could not vary based on the recycling efforts of each individual tenant, each tenant could see specific dollar savings associated with the building’s successful recycling efforts. The credit should be separately identified or “line-itemed” on the bill as coming from a recycling credit.

Using this strategy, each tenant would have a financial stake in helping make sure that:

- The building continued to have recycling available,
- That there was enough participation to keep it “qualified” to receive discounts, and
- That contamination was low enough to keep the building “qualified”.⁵

The electric, water, or wastewater utility/department could search for all individual accounts with the same street address as the apartment building, and qualify those accounts for the rebate. The fact that the amount of the credit does not vary reduces the burden on the other utilities in terms of programming, complexity, etc. The dollar amounts of the discounts could be handled administratively through inter-departmental transfers between fund balances. The revenues for the subsidy would be built into the appropriate solid waste rates as part of the computations of revenue requirements.

Recycling “credits” to tenants can be issued through electricity or water bills for those communities with municipal solid waste and municipal energy, water or sewer utilities. This provides a mechanism to get the recycling incentive to the tenant, instead of the apartment building owner.

3) Incentivize the Haulers – Making the Service Provider the Agent of Recycling

Communities with hauler-provided service (through contract or franchise) can consider making the service provider their field agents for increasing recycling. The community provides financial rewards to the haulers for increasing the recycling or meeting recycling goals from the target sector. The service provide is allowed to develop the most effective and cost-effective ways to achieve the goal. As a parallel, penalties may be needed if progress is not made. It is up to the hauler to determine whether it makes most sense to get more tonnage from existing buildings, bring new buildings on line, etc.

⁵ If desired, the City could gradually increase the level or qualifications for “recycling” to keep showing progress.

Several guidelines might be suggested for the structure of these incentives. One example of how this might be structured is provided by communities in California that offer lower franchise fees to haulers that can demonstrate meeting threshold recycling goals for the sector (25%, 50%, etc.)⁶ SERA's research has found communities that offer half the franchise fee for haulers that demonstrate reaching 25%, allowing complying firms to pay 10% franchise fees instead of 20%, for example. This can result in significant savings for the hauler, and the community gets additional recycling cost-effectively in an important sector.

Incentives to haulers can help them help the community achieve greater recycling without introducing significant City-sponsored additional programs, infrastructure, and staffing.

Financial incentives to the haulers should be geared toward encouraging and continuing “good behavior” (low contamination) and increased recycling. To the extent possible, the incentive should be structured in the same terms as the goals the City is trying to meet, so that the two sets of actors are “on the same page” in trying to achieve the same ultimate goal – increasing recycling, getting more participant buildings, meeting goals for households, reaching diversion percentages, etc. Haulers can also determine whether it makes sense to pass through financial incentives, increase convenience, or use other strategies to increase recycling. Penalties could be assessed for contamination, etc., and that would provide incentives for the hauler to solve the problem or find other buildings.

One concern that some communities have is whether small buildings would get access to recycling service. If the incentives are structured to provide rewards on the basis of number of buildings that participate, they may. If the rewards are structured in terms of number of households represented, number of tons, or reaching recycling percentages, they may not. Two-part goals could also be structured if this is an important goal. However, if the goals are really to reach percentage recycling goals or to increase recycling tonnage, small buildings frankly may not represent the best resource for reaching the goal.

4) Requiring Recycling Plans

One mechanism available for “jump-starting” recycling is to require multifamily (and potentially commercial) buildings to develop and file recycling plans.⁷ These plans could take a variety of forms, and could be kept on site, filed with a community agency, filed with the hauler, or other requirements could be set.⁸

⁶ Note that this is a very fruitful possibility for providing incentives in the commercial sector.

⁷ SERA researched this option in more detail for a project for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. The project was summarized in an article by the author in *Resource Recycling*, 1999. For more detail, refer to the article, or copies of the Massachusetts Recycle 2000 report can be obtained by contacting the author.

⁸ These could include requirements to implement some threshold level of recycling program, or requirements for buildings greater than a certain size, etc.

Although they stop short of requiring recycling, requiring recycling plans can help:

- *Force buildings to at least think about recycling and recognize the benefits they might achieve from recycling, and*
- *As a result, get some buildings to sign up for recycling.*

This strategy works to increase attention on recycling in the multi-family (and potentially commercial) sector, and shifts some responsibility for recycling to important generator sectors or segments – not just the haulers. The approach has precedent – SERA found more than a half dozen communities and counties that had implemented or were implementing recycling plan requirements for commercial businesses, and/or multifamily buildings.⁹ These communities are already reporting success for the programs, or are anticipating success. One community described the (commercial) program’s success, saying that ‘rather than 20% of the businesses recycling and 80% not, we get 80% recycling and 20% not because of this requirement’. Another city’s recycling plan form allows businesses to either comply with recommended materials to reach the goal, or lets them select materials based on their own assessment of disposal to reach the goal.

Information could be mailed out to buildings, including background information and suggestions regarding recycling strategies. The materials could also include a returnable “short form” outlining the recycling plan that the business (or multifamily building) intends to undertake.

Issues of enforcement and responsibility become important. Some enforcement concerns and issues include:

- Enforcement at the local level – with local haulers – is most common thus far. Enforcing uniformly at the state level may be more difficult.
- States can generate lists of local and state businesses (commercial); multifamily buildings may be more difficult at the state level. Lists from utilities, haulers, or from tax records may be useful.
- Paperwork could become a huge issue. One way to reduce the initial burden is to phase in implementation – beginning with largest buildings.

In similar work for some clients, SERA found there was concern about establishing a regulation that would not be enforced, and the regulation would then not be taken seriously. The communities that require recycling plans elsewhere rely on a combination of inspections based on complaints (by haulers or residents) and random inspections, asking to see plans and/or checking compliance with filed plans. One city randomly checks whether plans are filed,¹⁰ and if not, and or if the plan described is not implemented, a 30-day “assistance” period starts. The city or haulers may be contacted for assistance. If, after 30 days, significant progress is not made, then the business is fined \$500¹¹, and this penalty phase has been implemented in a few cases to date. States or communities considering this option might conduct a comparison of returned forms against tax records (or other comprehensive lists), and a random sample of unreturned forms could receive letters or other follow-up. Then enforcement procedures as

⁹ Note that some cities require that businesses recycle, and other states offer special grants only if multifamily recycling is part of the program.

¹⁰ One city does not require return of forms, but requires the plans to be kept on site and they are randomly checked.

¹¹ Note that a sliding scale based on business size or other factor could be used.

described above could start. Workload and paperwork could be reduced by phasing in the requirements by size of building or firm; other strategies to reduce load include requiring plans in alternate years.

5) Requiring Space for Recycling

One key complaint from many buildings is that they do not have the space for recycling containers in addition to garbage containers. Modifying the building codes to require adequate space for recycling in new and remodeled MF (and potentially commercial) buildings can help address this difficulty. The goals would be:

- to provide space for recycling and garbage containers,
- to make recycling practical, and
- hopefully to make recycling as convenient as garbage for tenants.

Although modifying the codes and specifications can be time consuming, it is not very difficult technically, and the codes are generally under the control of the city. City inspectors can help develop the minimum space requirements (square feet) that should be required, at a minimum, for buildings. In general, implementing this recommendation should be fairly straightforward for communities that have set recycling in this sector as a priority.

6) Requiring Recycling in the Lease

Several cities recommend that building managers require residents to recycle as part of the lease. One city we interviewed argued that putting recycling requirements in the lease made it clear “up front” to tenants that recycling was expected, and that recycling would be available and relatively convenient.

7) “Hardware” for MF Recycling in Large Buildings

There has been recent progress helping address one of the biggest barriers to recycling for large buildings – buildings with centralized chutes.

Certainly, many communities have treated small multifamily buildings similar to single family for both incentives and collection, successfully extending the curbside recycling program and the variable rates or PAYT programs to garden apartments, condos, and other small MF buildings. However, buildings with centralized / shared garbage chutes posed problems because:

- There is only one chute – not one for garbage and one for recycling, so recycling would not be as convenient as garbage. Putting recycling containers near the chutes can lead to space problems, as well as additional labor on the part of janitorial staff to empty recycling containers on each floor, compared to one-stop emptying of garbage all together in the basement.
- Volume-based incentives (like “bag programs”) are not easily adapted, because it is not easy to encourage less vs. more garbage disposal. Indeed, once it arrives at the bottom, the garbage (and volume) is anonymous.

- Attempts to limit disposal could easily lead to piles of garbage in the halls and other unacceptable behaviors.

Systems are now available for providing practical recycling opportunities for large buildings with central garbage chutes – they can be retrofitted to be used for both garbage and up to 6 recycling streams. This makes recycling as convenient as garbage for tenants, and leads to significant increases in recycling. Information to date indicates the modifications can be cost-effective.

Hi-Rise Recycling™ of Florida has installed recycling systems in more than 200 buildings – including both new buildings and retrofits on existing buildings with centralized garbage chutes. Traditionally, these systems have proven a barrier to convenient recycling. Hi-Rise developed systems for handling both three-stream and six stream recycling programs. The three-stream system uses two diverter plates to sort the materials into streams; the six-stream system uses a lazy-susan carousel arrangement.

The key to the system is that recycling and garbage are equally convenient to the tenant. The tenant pushes the appropriate button at the chute – selecting “containers” for one recycling bag and dumping that down the chute, and then following with the “garbage” button for their trash disposal. This kind of system provides advantages to the building and tenant including:

- Eliminating containers on each floor;
- Reducing fire risk, pests, and smell; and
- Reducing labor for emptying containers floor-by-floor.

This system can be adapted to variable rates (or “pay as you throw” / PAYT) systems using weight sensors and key cards or other methods.

The systems have been installed in Florida, New York, Canada, and other locations. One impetus that has spurred acceptance in New York (besides the large number of large MF buildings) is changes in the law that allows some increase in rent for rent-controlled buildings that install the systems.¹² When asked about contamination and participation issues, James Wood of Hi-Rise noted, “certainly some of our best performing buildings are those with senior citizens – they have some of the highest recycling rates and the cleanest recyclables”.

However, for a wide range of buildings, the performance of these systems has been very strong. The CSR in Toronto sponsored an assessment of the system in several high-rise recycling buildings in the City. They measured recycling before and after installation of the systems and found increases in recycling from 25% to 45% in test buildings. Three year paybacks from lower garbage bills are fairly typical for the equipment.

Contamination was very low, and the systems were easy for customers to understand. The company has found that the programs also benefit from dedicated recycling educators, and education staff travel between buildings checking materials quantity and quality, updating education, and encouraging participation. Other systems may also be available, but this “hardware” has shown strong performance in a number of locations.

¹² This may or may not be preferred as a message to send tenants – “my rent went up because of that darn recycling program...!”, but at least it gets significant additional recycling and access in the building!



8) Tailored Approaches to Address Building-Specific Barriers

For most small to medium-sized communities, it is probably practical to use phone survey approaches, or meetings with the collectors and/or haulers to get information on the reasons that specific buildings are not recycling. Tailored approaches can be developed to increase recycling. First targets could be those with 1) easiest problems to solve and 2) greatest potential impact for increasing recycling in the sector (often larger buildings). These might be: 1) space; 2) contamination problems; 3) already at smallest container so no savings; or 4) other problems. For many (but probably not all) buildings, these could be addressed separately through the some of the strategies above, through incentives, or by working with the service provider.

Creative solutions to other problems have also been developed by recycling companies. For example, for smaller buildings with significant parking issues, Nuts and Bolts Recycling of Seattle, Washington¹³ makes one or two of the parking places shorter – but still long enough for compact cars. The recycling barrels or containers can then be put at the front end of those spots.

9) Traditional Guidelines for MF Recycling

Interviews with communities provided a number of key suggestions for improving the success of recycling in the multifamily sector, including:

- Outreach – in multiple languages – is important, especially in the multifamily sector. Explain how materials need to be prepared, and where they can bring materials. Some communities are experimenting with outreach materials that are all pictures so the materials do not have to be translated. One building glued examples of acceptable materials onto a very graphic sign to demonstrate exactly what was and was not allowed in the containers.
- Centralized drop-off recycling, located in places that people already go, was recommended. Examples given included grocery store parking lots, etc.
- Making recycling as convenient as garbage disposal was highly recommended, for example, putting garbage and recycling containers near each other.
- Recycling champions, or on-site enthusiasts to explain the program, keep the space around (and in) the recycling containers clean, were recommended by many communities.¹⁴
- Provide recycling for a variety of materials, label the containers well, and keep the area very clean and accessible – avoid it getting to be an unpleasant space to go to.
- Some communities recommended making the program mandatory.

¹³ Thanks to Susan Appel, President of Nuts and Bolts Recycling for this suggestion/example.

¹⁴ Some buildings offer these residents discounts off their rent because it saves efforts by the building janitors, and the buildings can sometimes save money by recycling. Note that buildings could be encouraged to identify these types of champions by using a variation on Suggestion 1 in this report. Seattle has a special “Friends of Recycling” program (FOR) that includes both single- and multi-family residents that would have meetings, conduct trainings, etc. Champions or friends of recycling could provide building-specific feedback on how well the building is doing, growth in recycling, etc. to help keep enthusiasm.

III. SUMMARY

SERA's research reviewed information from successful programs around the nation and developed a number of workable and creative approaches that have shown or could lead to significant additional recycling in the multi-family (and potentially commercial) sector. The set of strategies also provides options for incentives for each of the major actors involved in generation and management of waste – tenants, building owners, haulers, and communities.

Granted, some of the suggested approaches have some difficulties, and changes in this sector can be more complicated to implement than single family programs. However, if multifamily recycling is a priority, then communities should be willing to take risks parallel to those they took in getting recycling going in the single family sector. Financial risks were taken when cities implemented mini and micro can rates, and when high price differentials were structured between or bag levels to provide recycling incentives. These policy changes required assumptions and judgment very similar to what would be needed to provide incentives in the MF sector. These risks were taken on because communities had set priorities on recycling. Communities may need to be willing to take on similar risks if this sector is a priority – rates can be adjusted in the next period if needed to cover shortfalls or mis-calculations.

Financial risks and planning uncertainties were accepted when single family programs were developed. Similar uncertainties should not be an excuse for avoiding establishing programs and incentives in other priority sectors – especially since we know more now about programs, customer reactions, and waste management behavior.

For communities that are trying to meet recycling goals, extend landfill life, or that have financial responsibility for disposal costs, these strategies can be a strong assist, even in this traditionally difficult sector. A number of these strategies have excellent potential to increase tonnages in the MF sector. Communities (and states) could “kick start” stagnating recycling levels by increasing realistic opportunities for recycling in the MF (and potentially the commercial) sector. Given that multifamily and commercial tonnage can often make up the majority of MSW in communities, progress in these sectors is an essential component to meeting recycling goals across the nation.

Table 4: Tips for Successful MF Recycling

If possible...

- Make recycling as convenient as garbage!
- Provide an economic signal!
- Educate/Educate/Educate!
- Address building-specific barriers!
- Provide rewards for the hauler!
- Provide a local (on-site) monitor / champion / contact!

SERA, 1999.