



Got Trash? City Relies on Education to Sort It

By Jamie Goldberg
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When Rami Husary finishes a meal, he collects the trash and scrapes food from the table. Then, opening the trash bin at his parents' home, he dumps all the waste in together.

“We don't do compost,” said Husary. “It stinks.”

Well, he's breaking the law.

Championed by Gavin Newsom and implemented in October 2009, the Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance requires San Francisco residents and commercial businesses to sort their waste into recyclables, compostables and trash. If they don't, they could be fined.

Husary, an employee at Café Venice in the Mission, knows he's breaking the law, but he's not worried about repercussions. And really, he shouldn't be. When it comes to the disposal of trash, the city doesn't widely enforce every law.

In the case of the Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance, the city has been allowed to levy fines since the start of 2011, but no fines have been issued to date, according to Kevin Drew, the Department of the Environment's residential zero waste coordinator. When residents aren't worried about fines or it's inconvenient, some choose not to recycle or compost.

The Department of the Environment works with the Department of Public Works and Department of Public Health to determine serious violators of the ordinance, but currently they only issue fines of \$100 to those who have absolutely no refuse service — a requirement that predates the mandatory ordinance. During the Department of Public Works' five-month “Spruce Up by Sun Up” campaign, which ended in February, more than 800 businesses and residential properties received citations for failing to have garbage service.

“We're not trying to be the recycling police,” Drew said. “A lot of what we've been doing is education.”

So far, the Department of the Environment has worked with more than 75,000 residents and 1,000 businesses to get on track with the recycling ordinance, said Friday Apaliski, the department's outreach coordinator.

And the education might be working. San Francisco diverts 78 percent of its waste from landfills and, according to Drew, the amount of compostable materials collected has grown from about 350 tons per day to 600 since the ordinance went into effect in 2009.

Even before then, San Francisco was focused on producing zero waste. In 2002, the city was just over the state-mandated 50 percent diversion rate, prompting legislation by then Board of Supervisor President Tom Ammiano that set the diversion goal at 75 percent by 2010 — a goal that was accomplished.

Several factors contributed to the legislation's success: The city provided recycling and composting bins to more households, and offered economic incentives to households to reduce their garbage can size, and to collection companies to hit recycling benchmarks.

In 2006, the city started offering greater incentives to businesses, giving them a break of up to 75 percent on their trash bill for recycling and composting. As of 2010, 12,000 commercial accounts took advantage of recycling, and nearly 6,000 composted, according to the Department of the Environment.

But in pursuit of zero waste, Newsom asked that it be mandatory to recycle and compost.

Many residents, like Husary, still ignore Newsom's ordinance. Some 440,000 tons of waste still go to landfills each year — two-thirds of which could be recycled or composted, said Apaliski. This compares to 594,660 tons that were sent to landfills in 2008, according to the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

When it's easy for them, residents follow the law.

"We definitely recycle and compost," said Anna Fusco as she sat on the stoop of her home on Valencia Street. "The city has supplied us with all those bins, so it just makes sense."

But when it's not easy, things change.

When Fusco is away from home and has recyclable waste to throw away, she'll toss it in a trash can if it's the only bin nearby. And it doesn't help that the city lacks enough trash cans, she added — for some, fewer trash cans means they will litter.

Outside their homes, residents pick up a lot of recyclable or compostable waste at food establishments, which, like individual residents, are required to recycle and compost. Businesses that offer takeout options are required to have appropriate disposable bins visible to customers.

However, Apaliski said her department has focused on getting restaurants to recycle and compost in the kitchen, and are still trying to get businesses to do the same in the front of the store.

Many Mission businesses said they separate materials in the back, and that customers can ask if they want to recycle materials. But when the customers don't see the different bins, many just throw away recyclables.

"Some don't ask," said Jackie, an employee at Café La Bohème.

Across the street at Café Venice, Husary insists that the business recycles in the back. But the bin in the front of the store is filled with recyclables and trash, and though they recycle, they only do so because it's mandatory.

"Before, we didn't really recycle paper cups," said Husary. "It's ridiculous ... what's going to happen in 40 years if we don't do this? Who cares?"

Violators of the mandatory law don't fear repercussions. Drew said that the Department of the Environment has staff who go through bins and leave "love notes" to violators, but only three to four people.

Drew said they also rely on staff from San Francisco's garbage service, Recology, who do the routes each day, to locate serious violators. Yet Recology's public relations manager, Robert Reed, said Recology would not turn in customers to the city for improperly separating their waste. The company does turn customers in for failing to pay the garbage bill, though, and the city can put a lien on violators' property.

While enforcement appears incredibly difficult, the Department of the Environment and Recology think their education efforts are working. Staff members from both attend community meetings to educate residents about the importance of recycling and composting.

Reed said Recology garbage collectors will try to speak with violators on their routes. Recology also offers 20 separate recycling programs, listed on its website, including a sidewalk furniture pickup service.

All the businesses that spoke with Mission Local said they recycle and compost. But some Mission residents, who still dump furniture and trash on the sidewalk, haven't gotten the message, and getting them to recycle and compost is a different story.

"The Mission is very much a neighborhood where we don't do as much outreach as we could," said Drew, explaining that they have focused the most outreach efforts in Chinatown.

"But what we're finding overall is that it's not that difficult for people to sort their trash. Most people are doing it."

While the threat of legal action is minimal, for a lot of Mission residents the education is getting through.

"I didn't even know it was mandatory," said Mission resident Mira Carberry, 27. "But composting and recycling reduces the amount of waste that goes to landfills, and that's really important."