

What Every Long Islander Should Know: “Going Backwards”

By Nancy Rauch Douzinas

In the annals of Long Island folly, here's a trend that stands out. We're actually recycling *less* than we used to. Recycling rates peaked in 1997 and have declined ever since. From 2002 to 2004 they plummeted 27%.

What are we thinking of? We can't afford that.

Contrary to remarks made by vice president Dick Cheney, recycling is not merely a personal virtue. When folks don't recycle, it harms the planet . . . and costs taxpayers money.

The trash we don't recycle is either incinerated or shipped to off-island facilities. Incineration contributes to pollution and global warming. Plus, it costs \$80-\$100 per ton, according to the Department of Waste Management of the Town of Brookhaven (2007). Processing recyclables costs only \$40. So the more we recycle, the lower our tax bills.

Trucking the trash away is also costly. The Waste Reduction and Management Institute at Stony Brook University estimates that by 2010 Long Island will export some 1.25 million tons of trash per year, requiring 62,500 truck trips, and consuming 7.5 million gallons of fuel. Think of the expense. The traffic. The greenhouse gases and pollution.

To change this picture, we need a “recycling renaissance.” That's a phrase coined by Citizens Campaign for the Environment (CCE), which recently published a report card rating the recycling efforts of Long Island's municipalities. (The Rauch Foundation provided funding for the study.) Of 12 towns and 2 cities, only Islip earned an 'A.' There were five B's, two C's, three D's and 3 F's.

What *should* our towns and cities be doing? Many things, but three in particular.

1. Public outreach. People need to be reminded of the importance of recycling. Municipalities should take the lead, but few are doing so.

The Town of Islip is the exception. Islip does outreach to civic organizations, schools, and community groups. It used radio spots to publicize a Hazardous Waste Collection Day . . . and got record turnout. And a town-wide mailing on cardboard disposal brought a substantial, immediate increase in recycling. (Sometimes you have to use paper to save paper!)

2. School programs. Schools ought to be the vanguard of recycling efforts. But CCE found that most schools are basically ignoring their responsibilities—and New York State Law. What an example to set for our students! Islip, Brookhaven, and Oyster Bay give classrooms presentations on recycling. That is at least a start. Hempstead does more. They offer to collect recyclables curbside, free of charge, for any school that purchases the containers. If they can do it, others can, too.

3. Partnering with businesses. Businesses generate enormous amounts of trash, little of which get recycled. Municipalities should have programs to encourage businesses to recycle, but only a few do. Oyster Bay and Huntington offer curbside recycling for downtown businesses—a big success. Babylon has launched a pilot project to incentivize businesses to recycle.

Taking the lead on recycling is a smart move for town officials. How often can you offer your constituents civic improvement, and lower taxes too?

Nancy Rauch Douzinas is president of the Rauch Foundation. The “Long Island Index” provides data about the Long Island region, in order to promote informed public debate and sound policy making. For more information visit www.longislandindex.org.