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## Report Calls Recycling Costlier Than Dumping

By ERIC LIPTON  
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**R**ecycling metal, plastic, paper and glass in New York is more expensive than simply sending all the refuse to landfills and incinerators, even if city residents resume the habit of separating a sizable share of those kinds of waste, according to an analysis by the New York City Independent Budget Office that is set to be released today.

The assertion by the budget office, a nonpartisan agency, is based on a detailed review of spending by the Department of Sanitation that evaluated both how much it costs per ton to get rid of trash versus recycling it, and, perhaps even more importantly, how much the overall trash disposal price tag would go up if the city eliminated its recycling program.

No one at the Independent Budget Office is advocating that the city discontinue recycling. But after a year in which the city at first scaled back its program and now, this spring, is scheduled to return to a full menu of recycling, the goal was to step beyond the politics of the debate and simply lay out the economics.

"We are just trying to look at the numbers, so people know what we are dealing with," said Douglas M. Turetsky, a spokesman for the Independent Budget Office. "We want to let people make informed choices."

Yet the Independent Budget Office's conclusion—that recycling cost the city about \$35 million more in 2002 than conventional disposal would have—is so controversial that even before the new report was set to be released today, advocates of the recycling program condemned the analysis.

"We believe this report is deeply flawed and have discussed these problems with the I.B.O.," said Mark A. Izeman, a senior lawyer at the Natural Resources Defense Council, which is preparing its own report. "Unfortunately, it appears that they have not changed their analysis."

Recycling in New York City has long been a topic that has attracted passionate debate, as environmentalists have argued that separating paper and plastic, for example, not only saves trees and other natural resources, but is also cost-effective.

That argument was used last year to convince the City Council and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to restart glass recycling as of this April, and to return to weekly recycling citywide, reversing what in 2002 the Bloomberg administration had argued was a budget-cutting initiative. The environmentalists had countered that curtailing the collection of recyclable goods cost the city money, a position that was backed up by a report last year issued by the New York City comptroller.


It turns out that even the author of that report admits it had serious flaws, including inaccurate assumptions about how much the city spends on recycling. The new report by the Independent Budget Office, a draft of which was obtained by The New York Times, found that in 2002, when city residents were recycling 20 percent of their waste, an all-time high, it cost anywhere from \$34 to \$48 a ton more to recycle material, than to send it off to landfills or incinerators—depending on the accounting method used.

The higher cost for recycling results in large part because collection trucks must travel farther, — and therefore for more hours—to gather the same amount of


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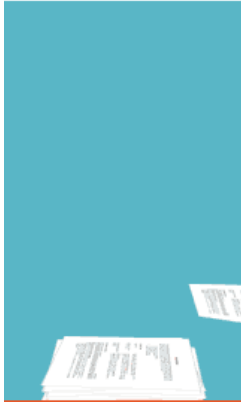
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material that a standard garbage truck would. Even though tipping fees at landfills are higher than the costs of recycling certain items—the city actually gets paid for its recycled paper—the collection costs are so high it overwhelms any windfall.

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"Simply put, the cost of paying two uniformed sanitation workers to drive an eight-hour shift collecting recyclables," the draft of the report says, "is the same as the cost of paying them for an eight-hour shift collecting trash, but yields fewer tons of recyclables than the same shift would yield tons of refuse. The result is a higher average cost of collection per ton."

Some costs associated with recycling are fixed and would not simply disappear even if the city threw out all its trash. It is not fair to assume that all of the extra costs that recycling imposed on the city in 2002 would be saved if all city waste was simply dumped. But even taking those fixed costs into account, the Independent Budget Office budget office found that if all recycling were dropped, the overall cost to the city of getting rid of its waste would still be lower.

These conclusions, according to the draft report, would still be valid, although to a lesser extent, after the city starts a new, more attractive 20-year contract to dispose of its recyclable items than it had in 2002. In that year, the city had 3.1 million tons of trash and 796,000 tons of recycling material, including 407,000 tons of paper.

A spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg, Jordan Barowitz, said he was not surprised by the report's conclusions. "The I.B.O. report recognizes that evaluating recycling has to be based upon an analysis of the overall cost of the program," he said.

Mr. Izeman said he could not refute the report's conclusions, but he questioned how the budget office arrived at its cost figures for recycling, saying that it unfairly included certain debt costs and did not fully reflect the more favorable terms the city hopes to get under the new contract.

There are ways the city could change the balance of the equation. Because there is almost no market for recycled glass, the cost of recycling it is particularly expensive. So if the city did not resume glass recycling, the overall recycling program would be more cost-effective, the report shows. Also, if city residents were to recycle a significantly larger share of their trash, the so-called "diversion rate" could go so high that the program would start to make economic sense. The city might also find a way to more efficiently collect recyclable goods, or find contractors that either charge the city less to get rid of them or pay the city more for certain items, like recycled paper.

But as it now stands, the program is a money loser, the report concludes.

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