

# KENTUCKY CITY

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Read the previous Kentucky City online at [kic.org](http://kic.org).

**ON THE COVER**  
Covington, Kentucky riverfront historical pier lights  
Credit: Rob Dun, Shutterstock





# RECYCLING PROGRAMS TAKING HITS IN KENTUCKY

## Communication to Constituents Is Key

by Samantha Brown, Guest Writer

For decades, recycling has been a commodity used by households and businesses to reduce waste and remain environmentally conscious, but programs are collapsing nationwide. Many contributing factors come into play as U.S. cities stop recycling partially or, in some parts of the country, altogether — including reduction of the recyclable materials most processing facilities are equipped to handle, the change in manufacturing of many plastics, consumer behavior, and China’s decision to no longer accept used plastic and paper.

### Central Kentucky No Longer Accepting Paper

“We’re really facing that pressure here in Kentucky,” said Gregory Butler, manager for municipal sales at Republic Services in central Kentucky. In May, city officials in Lexington announced a temporary suspension to recycling paper products,

effective immediately. According to an article from the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, the move will affect more than a dozen central Kentucky localities, including Berea, Danville, Frankfort, Georgetown, Harrodsburg, Lawrenceburg, Midway, Mt. Sterling, Nicholasville, Paris, Shelbyville, Simpsonville and Versailles.

The move extends to office paper, newspapers, magazines, cereal boxes, paper rolls and other paper-based products. “We’re no longer seeing the newspaper on the market that we would 20 years ago,” Butler explained. “So, there’s a significant reduction of the quantity of that material.”

Dry, corrugated cardboard, however, like cardboard boxes, is still accepted in those cities. The decrease of newspaper and other paper materials on the market appears to be a way for cities to keep pace with separating the materials the facility does accept, while

sorting contaminants. Essentially, what facilities like Republic Services, which partners with the City of Lexington, need is to hire more people on the line who can pull out contaminated materials, which would increase labor costs. Butler said the city is focused on labor and on “trying to reduce



“Most of the facilities in Kentucky were built in the early 1990s and they were just designed to manage newspaper, which there isn’t anymore.”

– Gregory Butler



contamination, trying to find more efficiencies in the existing system.”

“Most of the facilities in Kentucky were built in the early 1990s and they were just designed to manage newspaper, which there isn’t anymore. It’s not a system that’s designed to separate different types of plastic very well or to handle cardboard, you know, the Amazon phenomenon that we see,” Butler said. “So much of that is household now, where it used to be all commercial.” Today’s facilities are older, Butler said, and aren’t as equipped to handle new contamination requirements.

### Southeast Asia’s Impact on U.S. Recycling

Prompting this trickle-down effect of recycling hardships is China, which until early 2018 had been buying more than half of the world’s collected recyclables for use as feedstock for its manufacturing industry. The U.S. previously exported one-third of its collected recyclables, about half of which went to China. Chinese officials ultimately decided too much trash was mixed in with cardboard and certain plastics. Since then, Thailand and India began accepting more materials, but are beginning to impose restrictions.

“China’s decision ... significantly changed everything,” Butler said. “Materials that, largely from the coasts, were going to China are no longer able to do that, and they in turn started to move that material into the Midwest and the Southeast.”

With fewer buyers, American cities are forced to charge cities more for recycling programs. Fortunately, Republic has found that communities are receptive to the idea. Susan Piazza, senior manager of area municipal sales with Republic Services, mentioned a national survey conducted with management consulting firm Cicero Group. “It actually indicates they would rather pay more to keep recycling as an option versus eliminating that charge and then not having an opportunity to recycle,” she explained. “The survey shows 79 percent of what they paid for solid waste they would be willing to pay for recycled containers picked up weekly.”

While these findings don’t necessarily mean that’s where the extra charges would

be allocated, it’s an important component in measuring the community engagement to the programs, and those sentiments do extend to the Bluegrass State. “We have been out in our communities that we work with in central Kentucky and what I find is that they want to embrace it,” Butler shared. “They want to figure out how to keep this going. Their residents think it’s very important and we want to support that for them.”

### Educating the Public

Consumer behavior indisputably contributes to the rise of contamination in America’s existing recycling processing facilities. Many consumers will put materials into containers hoping they’ll end up where they need to go, in a practice Republic calls “aspirational recycling.”

“It takes money, it takes time, it takes effort to pull those materials that aren’t recyclable out of the stream and defer them where they need to go,” Butler said.

The National League of Cities found that outreach campaigns have helped triple the U.S. recycling rate over the past three decades, and they can help in the efforts to combat contamination and promote proper recycling habits. Butler said the message “You should recycle” should be transformed to “How to recycle.”

“That’s requiring us to go out into communities and work with our community partners to do educational things — whether that’s on the container or newspaper ads, or community events,” Butler explained.

Strategies like using social media platforms and praising households and businesses for recycling correctly can also be effective. Conversely, negative reinforcement can be a successful strategy by imposing simple citations and fines.

“I think that residents that are educated and understand what the five materials are that we generally accept in Kentucky — paper, cardboard, glass, metal (aluminum cans) and plastic bottles and jugs (No. 1 and No. 2) — those are the things that we want, and we don’t want anything else,” Butler explained. “If we can get that message across, which is a huge endeavor, to

## COMMON MATERIALS ACCEPTED IN KENTUCKY

### Paper

- ✓ Flattened cardboard (empty)
- ✓ Paper containers and cups (empty)
- ✓ Milk, juice and soup cartons (empty)
- ✓ Newspapers/inserts, phone books, magazines, junk mail and office paper
- ✗ No tissue

### Plastic

- ✓ Plastic bottles, cups and containers (empty)
- ✗ No plastic bags (they can get stuck in the processing equipment at the recycling facility and shut down processing for hours)

### Glass

- ✓ Glass bottles and jars (empty; amber, green and clear bottles)
- ✗ No windows or ceramics

### Metal

- ✓ Steel and aluminum bottles and cans (empty)
- ✗ No paint cans



## HOW TO PREPARE YOUR RECYCLABLES

- ✓ Recyclables should be empty
- ✓ Do not use plastic bags; leave recyclables loose
- ✓ Return grocery bags to participating stores for recycling; many grocery stores have a dedicated bin near the entrance to deposit used grocery bags

our customers across the state, I think that would really change things.”

Online resources prove time and again to be effective and can provide instant education to consumers. “Our customers have the ability to go on to the website, republicservices.com or the My Resource app, and they put in their address and it’ll show them what is recyclable in their com-

munity,” Butler explained. “Theoretically, they could be standing with their phone if they’re wondering if it’s something that can be recycled and see the materials we accept right there.” Another online resource Republic Services provides is recyclingsimplified.com, which offers recycling basics, expert tips and resources for residential, municipal and business use.

Butler said the company is working with its community partners to figure out how to emphasize recycling efforts, which is different on a city-by-city basis. The notion that recycling creates revenue for communities is no longer true, but Butler said that doesn’t mean it’s not worthwhile. “I think the decision to recycle material, to embrace the reduce, reuse, recycle mantra is fantastic and one that we fully support as a company, but we do have to pay for the cost to collect that material,” he said. “It still requires a truck and material and fuel and all those things, and we have to pay for it to be processed, and I think those costs need to be separate from the value of the material itself.”

Recycling as a commodity is definitely taking significant hits. While the market has fluctuated and ultimately diminished, and as revenues decrease, global challenges have certainly taken hold, but, as Butler said, that doesn’t mean it’s not worthwhile. “These communities that want to do it, we’re here with them, and we’ll figure out a solution that works for them.”

Sources  
www.nlc.org  
www.nytimes.com  
www.kentucky.com

### LEARN MORE! Register at klc.org

#### City EDvantage Session: Recycling Re-Imagined - How to Fix a Broken System

Friday, October 25, 2019  
KLC Training Room, Lexington  
10 a.m.-12 p.m., plus lunch  
Registration is free and lunch is provided  
Sponsored by Republic

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