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Recycling efforts boost towns' coffers

Publicity drive helps to reduce disposal costs

By Robert Knox, Globe Correspondent

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Trash disposal was down 5 percent and recycling up 7 percent last year in the 15 towns of the South Shore Recycling Cooperative, following a campaign to make residents aware that trashing used paper is tantamount to throwing away money.

That same campaign, organized by the regional cooperative, is going statewide today under the name "Mass Recycles Paper!"

A sign at the Hingham transfer station sums up the effort's message: "Hingham threw \$240,000 in the trash in 2005. Stop the waste. Recycle more paper. It's easy!"

People in Hingham listened. Last year residents threw away 161 fewer tons of paper and cut 628 tons in solid waste from the trash bill. Using the average disposal cost of \$76 a ton, the reduction saved taxpayers nearly \$48,000.

Scituate raised its percentage of waste materials recycled from 38 percent to 46 percent.

Whitman posted significant gains also, boosting its recycling rate from 13 to 16 percent.

Claire Sullivan, the South Shore co-op's director, decided to target paper after a study funded by the state Department of Environmental Protection showed that member towns spent at least \$2.1 million two years ago to dispose of an estimated 30,000 tons of recyclable paper and cardboard.

The study concluded that if the waste paper had been recycled, the towns could have received up to \$400,000 for it, because paper fiber is in high demand locally and overseas.

"We're starting to see a surge all over our communities," Sullivan said of last year's improvements. "The tide is turning."

Co-op member towns also include Abington, Cohasset, Duxbury, Hanover, Hanson, Holbrook, Kingston, Marshfield, Norwell, Plymouth, Rockland, and Weymouth.

The South Shore Recycling Cooperative's paper waste awareness campaign included "shredding events" to publicize the value of recycled paper. People were invited to bring documents to shredding machines outside Staples stores.

The idea, Sullivan said, was to get people used to identifying paper as a material to be recycled. The result was that last year member towns recycled 1,734 more tons of used paper, saving taxpayers more than \$50,000 to dispose of wastepaper - typically by burning it and burying the ashes - despite increased disposal costs.

"As the trash prices go up, we will have to address it sooner or later," said Tom Burnett, a recycling advocate and former public works commissioner in Whitman. Burnett helped his town promote recycling by increasing curbside pickup of recyclables from biweekly to weekly, which probably figured into his town's improved performance.

But Pat Durkin, chairman of the Hingham Recycling Committee, said his town's recycling rate is still too low.

"People are making the lazy choice too often," Durkin said. "In an era of sustainability, it's irresponsible."

While the increase in Hingham's recycling rate from 19 to 26 percent last year is encouraging, Durkin thinks more can be done. His town is working to get that rate up with more visibility, he said, more recycling bins around town, and more information on what and how to recycle on the town's website. Other towns in the region also might have benefited from an effort by Abitibi Paper Retriever, a recycling program that places containers in public locations to encourage people to recycle paper and save energy.

The statewide public awareness campaign starting today, designated "America Recycles Day" by federal officials, will be advertised on billboards and on MBTA trains and buses to reach people who do not drop their trash off at transfer stations.

The campaign will try to get the message out that an expanded paper recycling effort would include shredded paper in clear plastic bags, envelopes with windows and clasps, paper with paper clips and staples, spiral notebooks, fax and construction papers, boxes for cereal or similar products, manila folders and cards, catalogues, paperback books, and paper egg cartons.

These kinds of paper can mingle in the recycling bins with the old standards: newspaper, magazines, white and colored office paper, and junk mail.
