

Cardboard Disposal Ban for Fort Collins: Now What?

By Ana Arias

Fort Collins is leading the way for Colorado: on March 5, it became the first community in our state to require corrugated cardboard be recycled or reused, but not thrown in the landfill. In fact, as far as we can tell, the nearest community to us that requires cardboard recycling is Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which is 800 miles from Fort Collins!

By requiring citizens and businesses to reuse or recycle corrugated cardboard containers and packaging materials, our leaders are paving the way for Fort Collins to divert approximately 12,000 tons of bulky cardboard from cluttering up our landfill, according to a 2006 strategic plan for waste diversion and a 2012 waste stream study.

Corrugated cardboard is easily identified by its three layers; when looking at the edge of the cardboard, a wavy inner liner can be seen. Corrugated cardboard is often used in boxes to ship items. Paperboard, the material used for shoe boxes and cereal boxes, has only one layer and is not covered by this ordinance. Note that waxed cardboard, which is used to ship bulk produce, and food-contaminated cardboard, such as a greasy, cheese-covered pizza box, are excluded from the ordinance. These materials should be composted or landfilled. For more details and guidance on identifying or recycling cardboard, please visit fcgov.com/cardboard.

Since it began considering this ordinance in November 2012, the City Council heard extensively from local citizens and businesses on the pro's and con's of banning cardboard from the landfill. Ultimately, Council's decision was guided by two main factors: meeting the goal of diverting 50% of the community's waste stream from landfill disposal; and the opportunity to prevent approximately 42,000 tons of carbon dioxide equivalents from being released. This translates into fewer harmful gases in the atmosphere and a significant step toward achieving the Fort Collins Climate Action Plan goals.

Additionally, this ban on the landfill disposal of cardboard may be a first step for our community to embark on a goal for "near-zero" waste. The City will be conducting a community-input project to determine our next goals for waste reduction and recycling in Fort Collins later this year; stay tuned for chances to share your thoughts.

The ban can have positive economic outcomes too. Cardboard is considered a high-quality commodity and is valuable as a feedstock for making new cardboard and other paper products. Rather than paying to landfill cardboard, its value can be realized through recycling or reuse. Recycling cardboard helps keep money circulating in our economy and creates jobs.

By recycling paper fiber like cardboard, we're also saving on our nation's forestry resources. Healthy supplies of recycled fiber allow the timber industry to let trees grow longer, instead of harvesting them early as replacement fiber to make paper. Recycling a ton of cardboard saves 16 young trees from being harvested, and the longer trees grow, the more high-value habitat they offer for wildlife.

What's next?

Residents: Simply continue to place your flattened corrugated cardboard boxes or packaging in your curbside recycling bin, along with the rest of your recyclables. Rest assured, the new ordinance doesn't change the way households have been recycling cardboard since 2004, when cardboard was included in the Fort Collins curbside program.

Businesses: Two options are available for local businesses: 1) contract with your trash/recycling hauler to pick-up your cardboard materials (cardboard can be collected separately or mixed with other recyclables); or, 2) take your flattened cardboard to a free community recycling drop-off center. The City of Fort Collins Drop-off Center, open seven days a week, dawn to dusk, is located at 1702 Riverside Avenue (in the parking lot north of Rivendell School, at the corner of

Riverside and Prospect). The Larimer County Recycling Drop-off Center is co-located with the landfill at 5887 S. Taft Hill Rd. and is open Monday – Saturday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

City staff is available to help businesses address challenges they may face in complying with the cardboard disposal ban. Please contact Caroline Mitchell at 221-6288, or cmitchell@fcgov.com.

Basic recycling is not your only option to dispose of cardboard. Here's a sampling of potential other uses:

- **Re-Use is Top of Class.** Without a doubt, the highest and most effective use is to re-use cardboard boxes. Boxes can be reused for moving, storing materials, or shipping materials. The City is creating a new online Cardboard Box Exchange that will enable community members to contact each other to "give 'em and get 'em". In the meantime, visit online sites such as Freecycle.org or Craigslist to post or find boxes being given away.
- **Weed Barrier.** Cardboard is an excellent weed barrier in landscaping projects. Simply place the cardboard directly on top of the soil, and cover it with mulched wood or gravel to weigh it down. Since cardboard is an organic material, it breaks down over time, and the material becomes absorbed in the soil. In fact, some folks even include cardboard in their backyard compost bin.
- **Art-in-a-Box:** Mothers of young children tell us that a cardboard box has all sorts of applications for play-time, such as making forts, art projects, and even a pretend rocket ship to the moon! We've also seen examples of beautiful classroom artwork made of cardboard by elementary school kids.

Be on the lookout for more information on creative uses for used cardboard, photos, FAQs, nifty factoids about the history of cardboard, and stories from our Fort Collins community about how residents and business are keeping their cardboard out of the landfill. For more information on the cardboard ordinance, contact Senior Environmental Planner Susie Gordon at sgordon@fcgov.com, or at (970) 221-6265.