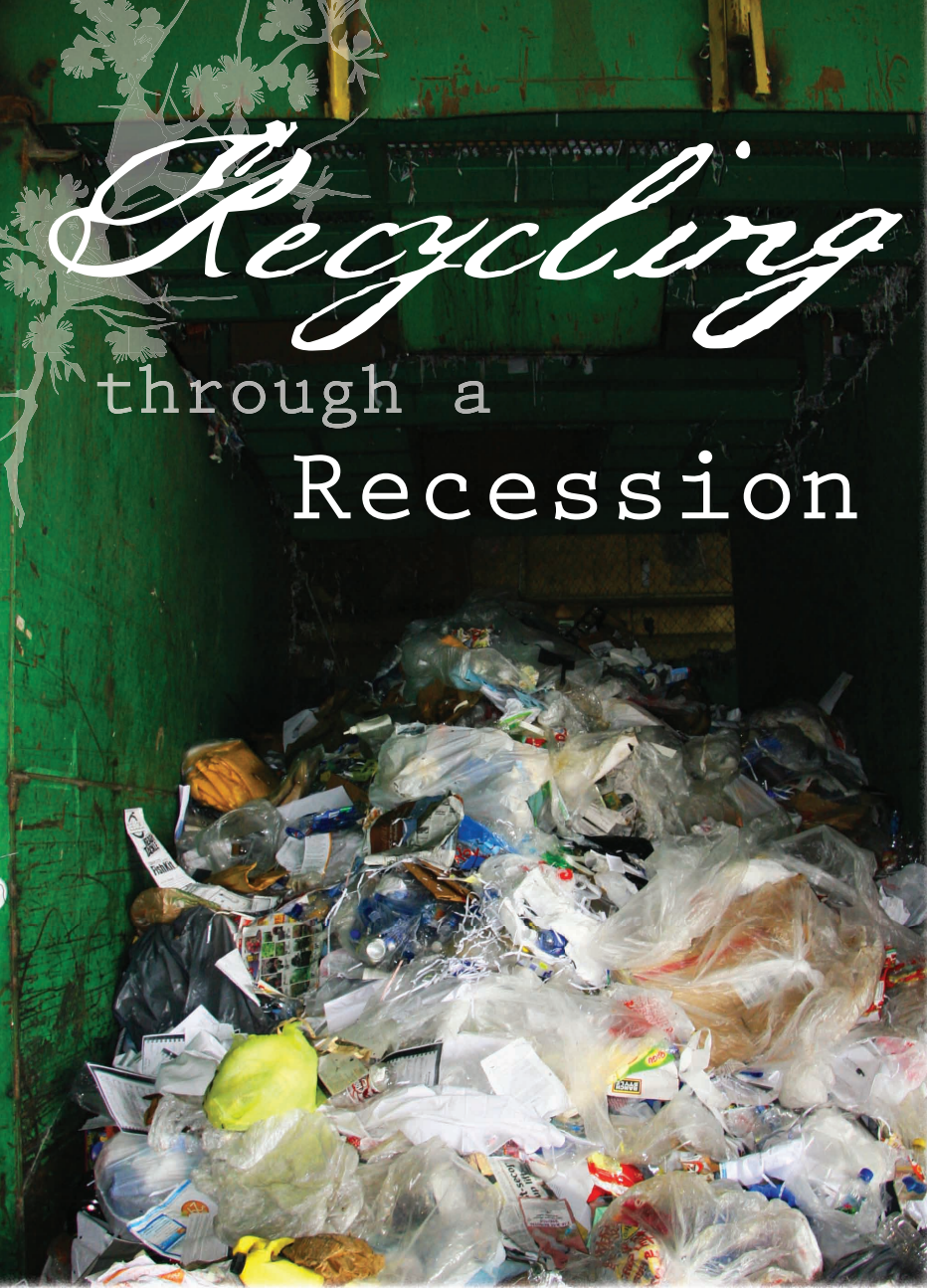


Recycling through a Recession



By Ashley Killough

It stood there. Bulky. Lifeless. Empty.

The refrigerator looked as if it had been plucked off the set of "That 70's Show." An artifact of the pre-stainless steel days, the starchy green tint had faded to the color of grandma's bathroom tile, and the long wooden handle was worn by a thousand cravings. It was an outcast, grouped awkwardly with a cohort of outdated appliances at Waco's recycling hub, basking in the sun of an unusually warm February day.

While the fridge had spent many years – perhaps decades – preserving its entrusted goods, it now awaited a new destiny. It would soon be dissected: its insides stripped of any remaining refrigerant, its plastic components ripped apart, its metallic frame melted. It was to be reincarnated and serve in capacities other than a stagnant afterlife in a landfill.

Cobbs Convenience Center isn't just a municipal

dumping ground. It's a place for Wacoans to turn their trash into recycled treasures.

"We have many people who come on a regular basis," said Megan Miller, program coordinator for the City of Waco's solid waste services. "We know a lot of them by their first names, their children, their pets."

With a mission to become one of the greenest cities in Texas, Waco's recycling efforts are seeing growing success. In the last fiscal year, its recycling volumes grew a record 43 percent, from 1,685 to 2,415 tons.

But like most markets, recyclable goods aren't immune from the economy's effects. Put simply, people are buying less stuff typically made of or packaged in recycled materials, such as cardboard boxes.

"As manufacturing as a whole has slowed, so has the demand for raw materials," Miller said.

While Waco has never profited from its recycling programs, the little money it used to make – roughly \$1 for every \$10 spent – has dropped to what Miller estimates about 10 cents for the same cost.

"They're taking a loss on this, and that says a lot about the city of Waco. This place is doing a wonderful job," said Elaine Alexander, environmental science professor at McLennan Community College.

Waco sells its plastics and paper to Sunbright Paper Recycling, a company that acts as a middleman for manufacturing mills that turn recycled goods into products. Sunbright sorts materials it collects from clients such as the City of Waco, Baylor University and McLennan Community College and groups them into 1,500-pound bales for mills to buy and convert into things like toilet paper and carpet fibers.

However, the price mills are willing to pay for these materials has significantly dropped. In December, recycled cardboard prices fell within three months from \$100 a ton to \$25. Plastic that was priced at 25 to 30 cents per pound decreased to 3 to 15 cents.

Kendal Hobby, sales representative for Sunbright, said the last time he had seen prices dip so low was 1996. This is bad news for a growing sector of the economy. Recycling in the United States is a \$236



Recycling materials are sorted outside of Sunbright Paper Recycling.

billion a year industry, one with more than 56,000 recycling and reuse enterprises that employ 1.1 million workers nationwide, according to the National Recycling Coalition.

"It's been this low before. It just hasn't stayed this low this long," Hobby said. "The outlook for 2009 isn't really good. Until the economy comes back and companies start ordering more boxes, the demand for paper and plastic will be low."

While the demand for recycled goods has dropped, the supply continues to grow. Miller said the City of Waco is committed to keep recycling going as long as possible. This might involve helping

Sunbright and M. Lipsitz Co., a metal recycling company, find new markets to sell their materials by passing on leads to when the city encounters companies interested in purchasing recycled materials, she said.

Baylor has no plans to table its recycling efforts. In fact, the university purchased 700 recycling containers at \$130 each and has been placing them around campus since the summer of 2008. Housekeeping staff collect both trash and recycling materials and place the contents of the new recycling containers in blue recycling dumpsters around campus. Baylor staff then empty the dumpsters and take the recycled materials to Sunbright on a regular cycle.

Carl Flynn, chair of communication for the university sustainability committee, says recycling at Baylor will continue to be cost-effective because it diverts waste from the landfill. While Baylor pays \$27.28 per ton of waste dumped at the landfill, the university pays nothing to send loads to Sunbright.

"We will always have trash that must go to the landfill, but the more energy we put into recycling, the less goes to the landfill, which actually lowers Baylor's costs," Flynn said. "However, it also extends the life of the landfill and is, ultimately, the right thing to do for the environment."

With only 16.9 years left until Waco's landfill reaches capacity, Miller stresses the importance of recycling more and using less. When groups come to tour the center, Miller shows off some creative products made out of recycled goods, such as a colorful rug made of plastic grocery bags and a basket made of aluminum bottle caps. Each guest receives a complimentary pencil, courtesy of recycled blue jeans.

"We have never made money. The money was just to offset our costs. It's always been about saving landfill space," Miller said. "We're still collecting and hoping, along with other vendors, to ride out the economy."

Photos by April Lemans
Design by Lauren Venegas

The Cobbs Center, located on 44th St. between Cobbs Drive and Trice Ave., accepts the following items without proof of residency and free of charge:

- Plastics #1 - #7, all colors
- Glass
- Metals: steel or "tin" cans and aluminum cans
- Paper: magazines, cardboard, printer paper and envelopes
- Computers and peripherals, except monitors

Other items, such as batteries and used motor oil, require a driver's license and a current City of Waco water bill for drop-off. There is a \$5 charge for monitors, a \$15 charge for televisions and a \$20 charge for large console-type televisions.