

# Bit by Bit

By Dan Phillips

We're going to talk money. Unfortunately, in order to REALLY talk money we'll have to wax technical, relying on esoteric concepts that emanate from deep within economic theory—such as “A penny saved is a penny earned.” And there are others that are far too complicated to actually go into here, having to do with 100 pennies equal a dollar, and so on. But I will try to express these concepts as simply as possible.

The city—our city—has a number of “enterprise” activities, which actually make the city money. They make ALL OF US money. And when the city makes a profit, that money is not spent on donuts for the staff, or cushy little trips to Belize. It is plowed back into the infrastructure that produced the profit in the first place, with the idea that even more profit could be had. It's a pretty nifty concept.

Take the recycling initiative at the Huntsville Transfer Station for instance. For years our solid waste superintendent has slowly and quietly been developing strategies for dispatching the mountains of garbage that a city our size produces. Since our landfill was closed a number of years ago, we must pay to have our garbage hauled to another landfill. And the more we can reduce that volume the less we have to pay.

Surprise, surprise, some of the garbage has value. Unfortunately, it can't be picked out of the waste stream and sold, because someone must be paid to do that, not to mention exposure to some pretty nasty cooties. We would be shooting ourselves in the foot if we even attempted such lunacy.

However, if, as citizens, we can separate items that can be sold in the recyclables market, then the city makes money. (Keep in mind that when I refer to the “city,” I’m referring to ALL OF US.) The items that can be sold include paper—such things as newspapers, pizza boxes, cardboard, office paper and magazines. There is a market for steel cans and plastic containers. Aluminum cans are always a sure bet.

If you organize a strategy at home or at your office, a simple solution is providing a container for like items. Putrescent garbage is REAL garbage (like chicken bones and moldy cheese) and needs to go into the trash, but there is never a reason to throw away an aluminum can, for instance.

If you like to eat food from steel cans, set them aside while preparing dinner, and then after washing dishes, swish them around in the dishwater you’re about to drain, and then toss them in a container for such a purpose. Leave the labels on. If you have airtight bins set up—perhaps outside—then there is no need to attract roaches. Then, once a month, make a trek to the recycling center. The staff there will unload it for you. As you drive away, hum a familiar tune, comfy in the notion that you have chipped a bit off of higher prices in the future.

Now let’s talk about what REAL garbage is. Vegetable waste is not real garbage. Vegetable waste can be composted—along with leaves and pine needles. By having a small plastic container on your kitchen counter, bits of celery and potato peelings can simply be put in the container. When it gets full, empty it on the compost heap in your back yard. Occasionally turn the heap over, and before long you will have the richest potting soil known. But grinding vegetable waste in your garbage disposer (and then going to the local nursery to buy potting soil on Saturday) just puts that much more pressure on our sewage treatment infrastructure.

Real garbage includes animal products. Things should not move on their own in your refrigerator, and if they do, perhaps these are candidates for real garbage.

Occasionally there are items in your refrigerator or freezer that you simply don't know what they are. I uncovered a fruitcake in the back of our freezer a bit ago that probably dated to the early seventies. In its frozen state it could have been used in a masonry project. Thawed, it would make a dandy doorstep. Personally, I don't think anyone is making new fruitcakes. They simply get passed around Christmas after Christmas, until finally they become ballast or petrify into yard ornaments. Actually, they can go on the compost heap. But since the half-life of a fruitcake is quite likely a decade, it won't become potting soil real soon. But put it on anyway. Think of it as roughage for your compost heap.

Now, a compost heap reduces our need for water—which is always a good thing. And if you have been in the habit of throwing vegetable waste in the trash, a compost heap will also reduce pressure on the waste stream that must be hauled out of Huntsville.

At the present time we don't have curbside pickup. But we can work toward that. Take a drive through The Woodlands sometime. Every house sets out a container of real garbage, but beside it are containers of other recyclables. Perhaps if we try to mind our recycling manners, we, too, could be that progressive. But we still have a bit of homework. We'll have to earn enough profit from recycling to fund such a thing. So, get busy.

