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Braving the Ups and Downs of the Recyclables Market – It’s Worth It!

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Most of us know a good bit about recycling and its advantages for the environment. But many are less familiar with where recyclables go once they leave the big rolling bin you park at the curb.

Q: What do recyclables and pork bellies have in common?

A: They’re both traded globally on the commodities exchange.

That’s right. After your local trash service carts your recyclables (glass, paper, plastic, metal) away to be processed through a recycling plant, they land (figuratively speaking) on the floor of the commodities exchange to be traded, just like pork bellies (and oil, cotton and corn).

Like all commodities, the market value of recycled trash rises and falls based on supply and demand, which fluctuates based on what’s happening in the broader global landscape at any given time. Historically, global demand for recyclables has been high – a seller’s market – as mostly developing countries bought and imported recyclables as a low-cost alternative to newly harvested raw materials.

Exporting recyclables kept tons of trash out of landfills and incinerators (which generate recyclable energy), and enabled your trash collector to offset their cost of complying with local, regional and national recycling regulations. That meant free recycling service for most Dutchess County residents.

But 2018 has brought a major development in the recycling market. China (the world’s #1 importer of recyclables) has tightened its standards for recyclable imports – specifically, banning unsorted paper and plastic recyclables, and dramatically reducing the level of acceptable non-recyclable pieces in the mix of a recycled load (“dirty” recycling in the industry vernacular). So, tons of previously exported recyclables will now accumulate here at home until recycling plants can adjust their equipment and process to meet the new standard (which can take months, if not years, to accomplish).

At the same time, significantly less global demand for recyclables in the commodities exchange means significantly reduced market earnings for the trash collectors who supply them and, as a result, a small increase in the cost of recyclables collection for their customers in some cases. You can help get more of Dutchess County’s recyclables exported by ensuring that the recycling you put curbside is “clean” as defined by set recycling guidelines for what is...and isn’t...recyclable. (Top offenders include plastic “grocery” bags -- which jam up recycling equipment, disposable diapers, and food and yard waste/compost.)

And, you can rest assured that whatever price increase you see in your recyclables service is likely a reflection of the new market reality vs. your local trash collector’s desire to charge you more. Despite the ups and downs of the commodities market, recycling must remain a Dutchess County mission and priority for the all the critical reasons that remain constant: less landfill (there’s currently not a single landfill in Dutchess County – let’s keep it that way!), less raw materials consumption and less pollution.

Together we can make it happen!