



Dan Crane chuckles as he and his wife, Gail, make one of two yearly trips to the Granger Recycling Center in Lansing Twp., Mich. Their efforts are on par with many Michigan residents, but fail to approach zero waste.

WASTE

PHOTOS AND STORY BY JESSICA HULETT

Eliminate the need for landfills? Some say the idea can become reality — but it likely won't be anytime soon

The frigid air makes not a sound on a wintry Saturday morning in early April. Snow flurries gracefully dance to the ground and ice burdens trees around Lansing, Mich., with a heavy armor after a rain and a freeze.

But that doesn't stop a few brave souls from doing their part to do the world some good by recycling. Cars pull into the Granger Recycling Center on Wood Street in Lansing Twp. with truck beds, car trunks and minivans packed with detergent bottles and newspapers. An old, brown carnival of what could have been tiger cages and dunk tanks await magazines, milk jugs, cardboard, tin cans, brown bottles and clear jars — leftovers from the crowd on any given day in the Lansing area.

The only sounds to be heard are the crashing of glass, plopping of newspapers and thudding of cardboard as those items become the tops of piles waiting to be recycled. What appear to be brown metal cages wait stacked to the side, full of several of the recyclables. The cardboard and newspaper bins are dented and worn,

survivors of frequent dumping since the recycling center opened in 1989.

On this quiet morning, Dan and Gail Crane of DeWitt dump newspapers, tin cans and other items from a full truck bed, one of approximately two trips each year the couple makes to the recycling center.

"We looked at the newspaper and it said June," said Gail Crane. "Luckily it was June 2002."

"We just start cleaning out the garage when company's coming and load up."

WASTE NOT

Recycling is one of many ways to work toward "zero waste," the concept of communities recycling and reusing products in an effort to eliminate the need for landfills.

The GrassRoots Recycling Network (GRRN) says that "waste is inefficiency." In one article from its Web site, Helen Spiegelman calls nature a zero-waste system and says that businesses must learn to be like nature by taking products and packaging back into production instead of allowing

them to be incinerated and landfilled.

John Trotti, editor of *MSW Management*, the trade publication for municipal solid waste professionals, said in his editorial from the March/April 2002 issue that those supporting zero waste are bashing the current system without giving clear insight as to what needs to be done to achieve this goal and how much it will cost.

"When you think about it, it's a little like asking doctors to do away with illness and then putting a few teeth in the suggestion by closing hospitals," he said in the editorial. "That way people don't have to get sick. No hospitals, no illness, right?"

Trotti said that an individual can choose to create no waste, but won't succeed because nature doesn't work that way.

Michigan has no policy for zero waste, and state media report that landfills will fill to capacity in 15 years. But Pete Pasterz, manager of the Office of Recycling and Waste Management at Michigan State University, doesn't believe that landfills are almost full.

"I've been hearing that for the 20 years I've been studying waste," he said. "What happens is that, as the landfills start filling up, owners petition to the state to expand.

"No one wants to live next to a landfill, so the owner can buy the adjoining land for pretty cheap. Why wouldn't they expand?"

Wesley Sherman, solid waste engineering coordinator for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, said that expanding landfills is easier than siting new ones.

"There's an economy to be had if you expand your landfills from the location where you currently are; there are no siting procedures," he said. "If you have one landfill you have a risk at one location. If you have two landfills you have risks at two locations.

The business side of landfilling is also a factor of expansion. Sherman said landfills are primarily for-profit organizations, and must balance making money by filling the landfill with spending money to expand.

RECYCLING WOES

Right now, Michigan is far from the strongest state in terms of recycling.

In a 1999 report from the Michigan Recycling Coalition, funded by a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Michigan had a 20 percent recycling rate, meaning residents recycled about 1.4 pounds of waste per day. The average for the Great Lakes states is 26 percent. According to BioCycle's 12th annual study, "The State of Garbage in America," Minnesota led the nation with a 45 percent recycling rate in 1999.

"Granted, other states have different ways of rating, but we're on the lower end of the spectrum," said Matt Flechter, the DEQ's recycling and composting coordinator. "We have a solid waste policy that was signed

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and Waste Management

back in 1988 and that's the waste policy we're still going on."

Flechter said many people would like to see a revised policy with less emphasis on incineration, a large part of the way Michigan dealt with solid waste in 1988.

While only about 20 percent of Michigan's waste is recycled, close to 60 percent is landfilled because recycling is about twice as expensive per ton of waste. Recycling activities are costly because they are either labor or mechanical intensive, with the goal of pulling valuable materials out of a mixture.

"The fact of the matter is, the reason we landfill waste is because it is less expensive than every other form of dealing with waste," Johnson said.

Although landfilling is economically the most efficient way of disposing of Michigan's garbage currently, Johnson said that in terms of materials, it isn't very efficient at all.

"You expend a lot of energy to make a variety of materials and then you throw 'em away," he said. "And all the energy that went into creating those materials is now buried."

Solution? Reuse.

"If we could turn back time and all of our beverages were in glass bottles, that would be the most energy-efficient way of doing it," he said. "Glass is a durable product, and once you make the glass, you can collect it and reuse it over and over again."

Johnson said a long-term advantage to

landfills that many people overlook is the mining possibilities of metals and plastics from landfills, another form of reuse.

"It's in this casket, this hole in the ground," he said. "There's a future benefit, I think."

Mining for valuable items in landfills also carries an economic benefit. It's cheaper than the actual mining process and creates additional landfill capacity.

Michigan saw a bit of mining about seven years ago when Carleton Farms Landfill in Sumpter Twp. — one-third of its waste ash from Detroit's incinerator — tried sorting through old ash, looking to remove metal that wasn't sorted out before incineration.

Using a machine with a conveyor belt and magnets, the landfill partnered with a recycling center, which sold the metal found in Carleton Farms. The landfill hoped to make money and free up space for dumping.

Ghalib Hanouti, solid waste technical section supervisor for the Wayne County Department of Environment, said the project didn't last long because the machine started breaking down. Because of the amount of old ash to sort through, the machine sometimes ran 16 to 24 hours a day and would become clogged. Moreover, the landfill had to hire someone to monitor and clean the machine, making the project less feasible economically.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

Back at the Granger Recycling Center, area residents continue to take advantage of the opportunity to bring their rainbows of detergent bottles and piles of cardboard to be plopped into the waiting receptacles.

Climbing into the bed of the truck, Gail Crane pulls a dark gold shopping bag from among the boxes and bags.

"Now that's what I wish I had," she said, showing the bag to Dan, "some Godiva Chocolate."

Dan laughed. The two finished doing their part to save a little waste, driving along the trail of bins to dump each item. 🗑️



A cage at Granger's Recycling Center in Lansing Twp., Mich., holds plastic milk jugs deposited by recyclers.