

# Recycling problems cause concern

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In this Friday, Jan. 24, 2014 photo, conveyors carry mixed plastic into a device that will shred them at a plastics recycling plant in Vernon, Calif. Photo: AP/Reed Saxon

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Montgomery, Alabama, opened a state-of-the-art recycling plant in April 2014. At the time, this plant promised to start a new age of recycling in the city. However, that new age did not last long.

The plant was run by a company called Infinitus. It allowed Montgomery citizens to put their garbage and recyclable material in one curbside bin for pickup. The plant then separated the recyclable material from the garbage. The plant also separated the recycling into clean paper, plastics, metals and glass that could be reused.

Infinitus sold these reusable materials to other companies. There was a period where Infinitus made quite a bit of money doing this.

## Plant Closes

In October 2015, all that changed. The plant was suddenly shut down. It was losing too much money. The prices for reusable materials like paper and plastic had hit rock-bottom. Another problem was that too much of the city's reusable material was too dirty to sell.

The closing of the Infinitus plant highlights the problems facing the recycling business.

For years, recycling programs seemed to work like magic. Cities, counties and states were helping the environment by recycling things without spending much money. Some communities even made money by selling their reusable material.

Recycling companies charged local governments very little money for their services. These companies simply wanted to sell any reusable material they collected. For many years, the prices for reusable material were very high.

The prices for nearly all raw materials were high from the late 1990s until 2008. In April 2008, scrap metals and paper sold for a record-high of \$380.25 a ton. One ton equals 2,000 pounds. Plastics experienced similar high prices.

## **Prices Go Down**

Then, 2011 saw these prices begin a slow downward slide. That slide became a sharp drop in 2015. Many prices fell to nearly half of their highs of only a few years earlier.

As these prices went down, recycling companies began charging higher rates for their services. It is not yet known if states are seeing less recycling due to these higher rates.

Many people in the recycling industry believe that recycling has to be easy. That is why a growing number of recycling programs use single-bin systems. These systems allow people to put all their recyclables into one container. People do not need to sort paper, cans, glass and plastics separately. Garbage goes in its own can and is sent straight to a landfill.

Single-bin systems are very easy for people. However, these systems make recycling harder for processing companies. The companies have to separate and clean the recyclable material themselves.

If convenience is the goal, what could be easier than putting all recyclables and garbage together? That was the idea behind Infinitus' Montgomery plant. However, that system has its own problems. The Infinitus plant found that a large amount of its reusable material was contaminated by the garbage.

Food waste is a common reason for reusable material becoming contaminated. For example, a pizza box may not be reusable if it is covered in cheese. Once these reusables are contaminated, they often cannot be sold. When a recycling plant cannot sell its material, it might not make enough money to stay in business.

## **No Easy Fix**

There is no single answer for how communities should approach these problems.

Montgomery seems to have given up on combining recyclables with garbage. The city plans to take over the Infinitus plant itself. It will likely only use the plant to separate different types of recyclables from one another.

Most communities that already use single-bin recycling are unlikely to change. That is partly because their citizens are used to the system.

Then there are the communities that are new to recycling. Some experts recommend these towns avoid single-bin recycling. They suggest a system that is easier for sorting plants, and which will result in less contamination from food waste. They say that educating people about recycling will help to solve problems as well.