

Increasing Multi-Family Recycling in Gainesville

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Executive Summary

Given the large number of students living in apartments in Gainesville, increasing multi-family diversion rates is essential to meeting the city's goal of zero waste by 2040. The following are changes that the city can make in order to achieve this:

- Make Recycling Bins “At Least As Convenient” As Trash Receptacles
- Standardize Recycling Bin Colors
- Provide Recycling Containers and Information for Rental Units
- Explore Franchise Zones for Multi-Family Waste Haulers

History/Background Information

Gainesville enacted its current mandatory commercial recycling laws in 1997. While these ordinances provide specifics when it comes to general business waste, the section on commercially collected residential recycling (e.g. recycling in mobile homes, condominiums, and apartments) is vague and hard to enforce. Such businesses are only required to have recycling containers in a “convenient and accessible” area, with no specifics as to what this means. These loose restrictions lead to recycling bins being placed in far corners of apartment complexes, at times as far as a ten minute walk from a unit, or down several flights of stairs. One example of this is Oxford Manor on Archer Road. This apartment complex has around 850 bedrooms in 366 different units, spread out over around 30 acres of land. However, there is only one area of the complex with recycling bins, placed in the corner of the complex.

Making recycling as easy as possible is especially important in student apartments. According to Forbes, people born after 1995 are very passionate about environmental issues,

including recycling.¹ Gainesville should thus ensure that this concern for the environment does not go to waste, and that students are able to conveniently access recycling bins. By doing so, the city could greatly increase waste diversion rates.

Preliminary Research and Findings

Make Recycling Bins “At Least as Convenient” as Trash Receptacles

A study from the University of Illinois found that increasing the accessibility of recycling bins in multifamily housing can increase recycling rates by as much as 66%.² Portland, Oregon capitalizes on this by including a line in their recycling ordinance that states that “the recycling containers at a multifamily complex shall be placed in a location or locations at least as convenient to tenants as the garbage receptacles.”³ Under Portland’s legislation, if multi-family residence owners are found to be in violation of the “at least as convenient” standard, they are required to pay a fine set by the city.

Portland’s policy even extends to apartment complexes with trash chutes. Ensuring that recycling remains convenient in apartments with trash chutes is essential, considering the fact that having a trash chute reduces the amount of materials that a building recycles by 11%.⁴ Furthermore, the frequency of trash chutes as the primary trash receptacle is likely to increase as more high-rise apartments are built around the city. To comply with Portland’s laws, such complexes typically place recycling bins in the same room as trash chutes. Portland’s policy is widely seen as a success, with Seattle currently planning on adopting a similar measure in the near future.

If this policy were to be adopted in Gainesville, there could be a year-long phase-in period before enforcement. This would give apartment complexes time to adapt and work with the city to best fulfill the requirements.

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/deeppatel/2017/10/04/11-environmental-causes-gen-z-is-passionate-about/#1322b0831849>

² <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1093/ei/cbi029>

³ <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/citycode/article/294930>

⁴ <https://dusp.mit.edu/sites/dusp.mit.edu/files/attachments/project/Municipal%20Curbside%20Compostables%20Collection%20%20What%20Works%20and%20Why.pdf>

Standardize Recycling Bin Colors

According to researchers from the University of Southern Maine, standardizing bin colors increases recycling rates.⁵ By requiring Gainesville multi-family residences to follow the current color scheme of single-family residences, UF, and Alachua County, the city could both reduce confusion on what recyclables go in which bin while creating a more uniform city and university recycling partnership. Therefore, the city should require that orange bins are for paper recyclables, blue bins are for bottles, cans, and cartons, black roll carts are for garbage, and green containers are for compost (as is the standard at UF). The city could further clarify which bins are used for what by mandating clear and consistent signage or stickers on every bin, stating what that one is designated for.

Provide Recycling Containers and Information in Rental Units

As mentioned above, convenience is a crucial component to increasing recycling rates in multi-family residences. One aspect of this is whether multi-family residents have containers inside their units to store their recycling.⁶ By either providing indoor recycling containers, or requiring multi-family complex owners to provide them, the city can ensure convenience in recycling for its residents.

However, given the space confinements in apartment units, finding one container that will work in every type of apartment is difficult. Portland, Seattle, and other municipalities have overcome this issue by providing tote bags instead of plastic containers. When asked, a Portland city employee said the tote bags were seen as a successful way to increase recycling.

Multi-family residence owners should also be required to distribute information to all new tenants, describing where the recycling containers are located within the facility and what materials can and cannot be recycled.

Explore Franchise Zones for Multi-Family Waste Haulers

Rather than having every multi-family residence independently contract with a commercial waste hauler, some municipalities divide their cities into “franchise zones.” Each franchise zone is then serviced by one commercial waste hauling company. Haulers are typically

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S092134491300061X>

⁶ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1093/ei/cbi029>

selected through a bidding process. Supporters of franchise zones say that they give a greater incentive to companies to invest in things such as clean-fuel trucks and increased recycling and composting opportunities. Supporters also say by reducing the number of trucks on the road, these zones reduce wear and tear on roads and reduce the number of pedestrian and cyclist accidents involving these trucks. Reducing the number of trucks on the road would also reduce the amount of greenhouse gas emitted by trucks. The latter benefit would help the city achieve its Vision Zero resolution. Many cities in the US have such a system in place, including Portland, Seattle, and Santa Barbara. Gainesville itself already uses this system for single-family residences.

Gainesville should explore the possibility of establishing franchise zones, including the potential cost changes to businesses, potential savings on vehicle repairs for waste haulers, and potential infrastructure savings for the city.

Pros and Cons of Potential Changes

Pros of “At Least as Convenient” Standard

- Would ensure that recycling bins are easily accessible, thus removing one of the largest barriers to multi-family residential recycling
- Has been widely successful at increasing recycling rates in multi-family residences in Portland
- Allows residents to form good recycling habits while in college

Cons of “At Least as Convenient” Standard

- Increased initial cost to multi-family complexes as they will have to buy more bins
- Potential increased cost to waste haulers, as they will need to empty more recycling bins
- Might be unpopular with multi-family complex owners, as they will have to invest in more bins

Pros of Standard Recycling Bin Colors

- Would remove any confusion as to correct recycling bins for residents transitioning from one form of housing to another (e.g. dorm or house to apartment complex)

Cons of Standard Recycling Bin Colors

- Initial cost to multi-family complexes as they would be required to replace their current recycling bins to meet the standard

Pros of Providing Recycling Containers and Information for Rental Units

- Increases the convenience of recycling for multi-family residents
- If containers have recycling procedures printed on them (such as Portland's tote bags), they could be another form of outreach/education

Cons of Providing Recycling Containers and Information for Rental Units

- Initial cost to either the city or the multi-family complexes, depending on who supplies the containers
- Some container sizes may not fit in smaller apartments

Pros of Exploring Franchise Zones for Multi-Family Waste Haulers

- Allows the city to gather more information as to whether this is a beneficial policy for Gainesville

Cons of Exploring Franchise Zones for Multi-Family Waste Haulers

- No foreseeable cons, since the recommendation is to just explore the option

Costs of Potential Changes

"At Least as Convenient" Standard

- Initial cost to multi-family complexes as they will likely have to buy more recycling containers
- Potential cost to waste haulers as they will have more recycling containers to empty in multi-family complexes
- Potential revenue for the city should multi-family complexes not comply and have to pay a fine

Standard Recycling Bin Colors

- Initial cost to multi-family complexes of replacing current recycling bins with ones that meet the standard

Providing Recycling Containers and Information for Rental Units

- Initial cost of recycling containers for either multi-family complexes or the city, depending on who provides them
- Cost of distributing information to new tenants for multi-family complexes

Exploring Franchise Zones for Multi-Family Waste Haulers

- Cost of staff time spent exploring this option

Multi-Family Recycling Proposals for Gainesville

- Implement “at least as convenient” standard as described
 - Require that all multi-family complexes provide recycling receptacles that are “at least as conveniently” located as garbage receptacles
- Standardize recycling bin colors as proposed
 - Require that orange bins are for paper recyclables, blue bins are for bottles, cans, and cartons, black roll carts are for garbage, and green containers are for compost
- Require recycling containers and information for rental units
 - Require multi-family complex owners to provide residents with recycling containers that can be conveniently stored in rental units
 - Require multi-family complex owners to provide residents with information on what can and cannot be recycled and where recycling bins are located
- Explore creating franchise zones for commercial waste haulers
 - City staff should research the potential cost of these changes to businesses, potential savings on vehicle repairs for waste haulers, and potential infrastructure savings for the city.