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A City Committed to Recycling Is Ready for More

By Felicity Barringer

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SAN FRANCISCO — Mayor Gavin Newsom is competitive about many things, garbage included. When the city found out a few weeks ago that it was keeping 70 percent of its disposable waste out of local landfills, he embraced the statistic the way other mayors embrace winning sports teams, improved test scores or declining crime rates.

But the city wants more.

So Mr. Newsom will soon be sending the city's Board of Supervisors a proposal that would make the recycling of cans, bottles, paper, yard waste and food scraps mandatory instead of voluntary, on the pain of having garbage pickups suspended.

"Without that, we don't think we can get to 75 percent," the mayor said of the proposal. His aides said it stood a good chance of passing.

How does he describe his fixation with recycling dominance? "It's purposefulness that could otherwise be construed as ego," Mr. Newsom said. "You want to be the greatest city. You want to be the leading city. You want to be on the cutting edge. I'm very intense about it."

In a more businesslike tone, Jared Blumenfeld, the director of the city's environmental programs, addressed one of the main reasons the city keeps up the pressure to recycle. "The No. 1 export for the West Coast of the United States is scrap paper," Mr. Blumenfeld said, explaining that the paper is sent to China and returns as packaging that holds the sneakers, electronics and toys sold in big-box stores.

Not that Mr. Blumenfeld does not have a competitive streak of his own. San Francisco can charge more for its scrap paper, he said, because of its low levels of glass contamination. That is because about 15 percent of the city's 1,200 garbage trucks have two compartments, one for recyclables. That side has a compactor that can compress mixed loads of paper, cans and bottles without breaking the bottles. (These specially designed trucks, which run on biodiesel, cost about \$300,000 apiece, at least \$25,000 more than a standard truck, said Benny Anselmo, who manages the fleet for Norcal.)

Another major innovation in the past decade was the development of infrastructure for turning food wastes — a major part of the waste stream in a city with thousands of restaurants — into baggable compost that is used in California's vineyards and the vast farms of the Central Valley.

The garbage from San Francisco's 750,000 residents is picked up on the pay-as-you-throw principle — the more garbage bins you need, the higher your monthly fee. (The average customer pays \$23.58 a month.) Also, in the past couple of years, it has banned plastic grocery bags and permitted the recycling of hard plastic toys.

The city has 12 recycling streams, or programs, devoted to different materials, including regular garbage, construction debris, furniture and paint.

“When we look at garbage, we don’t see garbage, O.K.?” said Robert Reed, a spokesman for Norcal Waste Systems, the parent company of Sunset Scavenger and Golden Gate Disposal and Recycling Company, the main garbage collectors in the city. “We see food, we see paper, we see metal, we see glass.”

The recycling rate for this curbside collection from homes, hotels and the city’s 5,000 restaurants is considerably lower than the overall rate, Mr. Reed said, in part because the rates on other waste streams — construction debris or material, like batteries and compact fluorescent bulbs, that the public brings in to special centers — is much higher.

Much of the concrete from demolished buildings, for instance, is recycled in new sidewalks. Another recycling stream is born of the community’s design sensitivities. “People are doing very well here,” Mr. Reed said. “They remodel, and they paint. On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, people line up to bring us paint” at a facility built for the purpose.

“We separate it into flat and latex, screen it to take out the chunks, and blend it in 55-gallon drums,” he said.

The three resulting colors — off-white, beige and green — are packed in five-gallon tins and sent to local nonprofit organizations, schools or charitable institutions in Mexico.

Norcal’s subsidiaries handle 3,545 tons of waste a day in San Francisco, out of about 7,800 generated citywide, Mr. Reed said. About 55 percent of Norcal’s total goes to the landfill; the rest is recycled. These figures become part of the calculation of the city’s overall diversion rate of 70 percent, which is the figure it just reported for 2006.

As John Sitts, of the state’s integrated waste management board, said, “the diversion rate includes recycling, composting and source reduction” — the last term representing “everything businesses and residents do to reuse things rather than throwing them out.”

The Los Angeles region most recently reported a 59 percent diversion rate, a number still being audited by state regulators. San Jose, at 62 percent, claims the best-in-class crown for cities of 900,000 or more. Statewide, the figure for 2006 was 54 percent.

With the exception of Chicago, which boasted a 55 percent rate in 2006 — the most recent year for which national comparisons are available — Eastern and Midwestern cities lagged well behind their California counterparts. According to the most recent annual survey of the trade magazine Waste News, in 2006 New York City was at 30.6 percent, Milwaukee at 24 percent, Boston at 16 percent and Houston at 2.5 percent.

San Francisco’s system is being noticed overseas. Mr. Blumenfeld’s calendar is full of meetings with officials from Germany and China, most of whom visit Norcal’s facilities, including the food-waste composting centers.

His visitors are learning, Mr. Blumenfeld said, that “you can recycle almost anything.”