



Opinion

SUSTAINABLE MARBLEHEAD: A chat with the director of public health

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With the holidays approaching, we thought it was a good time to sit down with Andrew Petty to talk about waste reduction, composting and recycling. We thank Andrew for his time and for all that the Board of Health does to ensure the health and safety of Marblehead residents. Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

SM: Andrew, thank you for meeting with us this morning. We are very interested to learn about the Health Department's priorities and challenges in addressing public health issues in Marblehead and, in particular, your efforts to address the town's sustainability needs. Can you start by describing the various areas you oversee?

AP: Our public health footprint is huge. We deal with a wide range of topics including clean water, septic and sewer systems, getting rid of waste, disease surveillance, food safety and tobacco control. One of our main priorities is making sure that waste going out will not adversely affect residents or cause pollution.

SM: You mentioned tobacco control. Were you involved with recent steps to address vaping?

AP: Yes, we control all permitting for tobacco sales. We started limiting tobacco sales below the age of 21 before the Commonwealth did, and we thought we had control of tobacco until vaping started. Right now, 90% of high school students have tried vaping. As a result, we have been working with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to address this problem.

SM: Was there resistance to banning vaping?

AP: Not really, as there are just a few stores in town selling vaping products.

SM: How large is your staff?

AP: We have four staff here in the Health Department plus the staff that runs the transfer station.

SM: What resources do you have other than town funding?

AP: We regularly apply for and receive grants from the CDC, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

SM: Many residents are very interested in recycling but have expressed concerns that the Town is no longer able to sell our recyclables. Can you explain how recycling works in town?

AP: Recycling is a commodity, meaning that someone is only able to buy waste if it is possible to convert it into something usable. There is some demand for aluminum and paper but much less demand for used glass, as it is actually cheaper to make new glass. In addition, the overall landscape for recycling has shifted in the last few years due to China's Green Fence and National Sword policies, which essentially terminated China's demand for our recycling. This is due in part to the increase of China's supply of domestic recyclables and in part due to the fact that we do not adequately clean our recyclables before disposing of them.

SM: How clean do our recyclables need to be?

AP: It is really important to rinse off all recyclables to eliminate any food residue before recycling.

SM: Some residents have asked us about the differences between the single-source curbside pickup and the various sorting bins at the transfer station. Can you explain how this works?

AP: Material picked up curbside by JRM is owned by them, and they sort it at their MRF (Material Recovery Facility), Greenworks, on Route 1 in Peabody. We are very fortunate to have a long-term contract with JRM, so we are currently not paying to process that material. Recyclables at the transfer station are transferred to several different facilities. Here we play the open market, where we pay the going rate to dispose of the material. Sometimes we are even paid for the material. We are very fortunate to have this long-term contract with JRM; if we were to negotiate a contract today, we would be paying \$74/ton or more which would cost the town at least \$300,000 a year.

SM: Is there information online to assist residents in understanding recycling options and procedures?

AP: Yes, we have a Single Stream Guide available on our website.

SM: What about composting?

AP: At present, 40% of our waste stream is compostable. As a result, there is huge potential to reduce our trash disposal costs. Note, it is possible to compost pizza boxes, paper towels and other soiled paper products in addition to food waste, which is a much cheaper and more environmentally sensible way of disposing of waste. We direct people to Black Earth Compost's website to learn more about what they can compost.

SM: We understand that Black Earth Compost has been active in town.

AP: Yes, the numbers of households using Black Earth to collect composting has doubled in the last year to over 400, and we get two to three new families a week. In addition to collecting curbside, Black Earth also has a drop off facility at the transfer station.

SM: Is there a point where the town would take over curbside compost collection?

AP: At present, it costs approximately \$350,000-400,000 per truck per year to remove waste. At this point it would not be cost effective for the town to remove composting directly. We are actively supporting increased composting; we have

composting and recycling at the high school and are introducing composting at the Middle School. In essence, we are working to achieve a zero-waste solution in our schools.

SM: What arrangements do we have in place to remove trash which is not either recyclable or compostable?

AP: Marblehead no longer has a landfill; we now operate a transfer station. As a result, we are currently paying \$92/ton to Waste Management to truck all of the waste that comes into the facility, including all curbside material, to a landfill in Keystone, New Hampshire. This is a methane producing landfill; the methane is collected and used to heat the University of New Hampshire.

SM: Do you see any other trends that we need to address?

AP: With Amazon deliveries going up, there has been a huge increase in cardboard waste. Somehow, Amazon needs to figure out how to pick up used cardboard from its packaging.

SM: Do you have any advice for residents during the holidays?

AP: Our general advice is “reduce, reuse and recycle” — in that order. If each of us embraces these ideas, we can make an incredible difference in reducing our collective carbon footprint. My hope is that every household will take responsibility for being as sustainable as possible. Note, you can compost pumpkins!