

Opinion

Sustainable Marblehead: The new and improved Transfer Station

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A few weeks ago a dozen of us toured the Transfer Station (aka The Dump) and came away with a new appreciation of the enterprise it has become. It was organized by Sustainable Marblehead (www.sustainablemarblehead.org) and conducted by Public Health Director, Andrew Petty. Sustainable environmental practice assumes an understanding that Earth's natural resources (like forests, minerals, clean water, etc.) are finite, NOT unlimited, and must be consumed no faster than they are able to replenish themselves. Current global population and lifestyles consume these resources nearly twice as fast as they are being replenished. The practices and services in place at the facility are a model for our own sustainable behavior.

What better place to begin the tour than at the beginning, of the dump that is. A landfill began operating at the 17 acre Woodfin Terrace site around 1930 with trash burns in open pit fires. In 1950 an incinerator was constructed. All the ash was left on-site until 1975. That was when the 'dump' became the 'transfer station' whereby trash was collected, then transported to other facilities for disposal via burning or landfill. Fast forward to the early 2000's with discovery of heavy metal soil contamination and the town's agreement to remediate the site. Town meeting approved overrides in 2011, 2013, and 2015 for a total of \$24M to accomplish this.

Today, the remediation phase is essentially complete, the contaminated landfill successfully capped. The next phase is construction of a new transfer station building and a separate swap shed.

In place and on top of the former landfill is a much expanded and fully functional recycling facility. If you haven't been there lately, it's hardly recognizable. From Green Street, the view is open and broad with wavy fields of grass covering the sloped terrain. The recycling area, formerly a cramped space is now wide open with more materials being collected at a more spacious, driver-friendly drop-off area. Separate dumpsters are ergonomically positioned in-line for traditional media including single stream glass, plastic and metal; paper; cardboard; and scrap metal. A new container is available for 'rigid' plastic, e.g. furniture or bins. Just around the corner are separate containers for used clothing and textiles.

Did you know clean rags could be dropped off in these bins?

The most recent service provided is composting by a Massachusetts company, Black Earth Compost (<http://blackearthcompost.com>). Much more comprehensive than traditional backyard composting, they collect the usual compostable materials plus organics and all food waste including meat, bones, dairy and shells. Finally all yard waste is collected in an expansive area at the back of the site and composted in row upon row into rich, black topsoil.

A primary benefit of the recycling and composting effort is minimizing the amount of the trash waste stream that the town pays, at \$86.50 per ton, to send to landfills. The public health director has all the numbers right at his fingertips—tonnage cost for trash disposal, tonnage cost or income (if any) for each of the recyclable media, percentages of all the materials collected, and more. Overall, Marblehead recycles at a rate of about 34 percent, close to the national average. (I was expecting we would be better.) How good could we be? With a recycle ratio of 80 percent, San Francisco is the best in class.

The remediation of the landfill site has been a long, complicated, expensive and necessary endeavor for the town. Thankfully the end is in sight. Even better, the Transfer Station, when completed, will be transformed into a more modern facility, more user friendly and offer more comprehensive services for town residents.

Our Public Health Director is knowledgeable and passionate but it will take more than that to move the needle on our recycle rate. More of us need to understand and embrace sustainable practices. One person at a time, many times over will get us there.

For more information, go to <https://www.marblehead.org/health-department>