

Are you being duped?

By Tracy Frisch

If you're like me, you don't enjoy being lied to. But if you hire a private waste hauler, you may well be a victim of deception. I say this because of the experiences of friends and neighbors, and the fact that these businesses operate without oversight by government authorities.

- Earlier this year one friend in the town of Greenwich happened to be looking out the window around dawn. He saw the waste service he paid to pick up his trash and recyclables make its stop. He was stunned to watch his family's carefully separated recyclables get tossed into the garbage truck with the trash and crushed.

When he called the company, the clerk told him that the recycling truck was being repaired and would be back on the road very soon. However, the same thing kept occurring week after week. He and his wife gave up on the company and resumed taking their recycling to the county transfer station in Greenwich. Before long they also canceled their waste collection service.

- A neighbor in Argyle recounted an almost identical story. The one time he happened to be around for trash pickup, he witnessed his household's recyclables going straight into his waste hauler's garbage truck. Angered by this breach of contract, he takes his recyclables to the transfer station himself.

Many communities, states, and provinces in the U.S., Canada, and parts of Europe, are pushing hard to reduce the amount of trash they incinerate or landfill. Some cities, towns, and counties have even *cut their waste more than 50 or even 60 percent*, compared to what they were throwing away five or ten years ago.

What we traditionally call "trash" contains many valuable materials. Burning them or putting them in a landfill squanders resources, energy, and money. Also incinerators and landfills pollute our air and water.

So what happens to the "waste" that used to go in the trash? Much of it can easily be recycled or composted. And some never gets produced in the first place when more people pay attention to what they buy and consume.

These changes in attitude occur when the local government provides education and incentives for everyone to change their practices. Waste reduction is painless, and it's even good for the bottom line. After all, waste is by nature wasteful!

Other places – including Washington County -- have no deliberate plan or public policy to shrink their waste. In these situations, families and businesses tend to produce ever-increasing amounts of household and commercial waste.

Here in Washington County however, many people are eager to recycle. Our five transfer stations give us excellent opportunities to recycle metals, paper, cardboard, glass, number 1 and 2 plastics, computers, and other stuff, and the county is able to sell most of these commodities, which normally have value. And a few municipalities, like the village of Greenwich, collect recyclables at the curb.

It's with the private haulers that people's desire to recycle sometimes, or maybe often, gets frustrated.

Washington County has a law (Local Law 3 of 1992) that requires waste haulers to send separated recyclables for recycling, rather than mixing them into the trash. But county officials have told me that the law has never been enforced and they have no intention of enforcing it. So much for law and order!

It can be tricky for an individual to discover what is really going on. That's why it makes sense for government to protect consumers from fraud.

- A Cambridge friend called a couple of waste companies to find out about their services. But when she asked them where they take the recyclables they collect, they wouldn't tell her. Needless to say, their responses did not allay her fears that they were putting the recycling in the trash.

Using a county transfer station is far cheaper anyway, she told me. And the transfer stations are more trustworthy.

- After hearing anecdotes about waste haulers that don't recycle, a friend in Jackson decided to investigate the matter herself. On several occasions, she boldly followed the truck of one of bigger waste companies. Although the driver and the other employee in the truck noticed her, she refused to be intimidated.

She was eventually able to photograph the waste hauler throwing someone's recyclables into the garbage truck. But it wasn't easy.

Almost none of this company's customers on that leg of the route bothered to put out any recycling. Perhaps they knew it wouldn't end up where it ought to!

When the truck finally stopped at a home that had put recycling out, the hauler's workers dumped it in with the trash.

Then they assured her that the recyclables went into another part of the truck. However, she had seen firsthand that the truck's compactor had only had one compartment, which was full of smelly garbage!

- Another Greenwich friend just admitted that she had been indulging herself with "the fantasy" that her waste hauler was recycling her stuff. She says that "deep down, I knew they weren't, or at least not regularly."

She wants to recycle, but doesn't end up going to the transfer station on her "precious Saturdays". Her solution: paying a neighbor a little something to take her recycling once a month to the transfer station, where he is going anyway.

Often we believe what we want to believe. But here's a case where there's a convenient option staring you in the face.

Patronize the county's recycling transfer stations. You only have to go occasionally and you can rest assured that your effort keeping your recyclables separate will not be in vain.

The transfer station schedule: Greenwich, Granville, and Kingsbury: Tues., Fri., and Sat. 6:30 AM – 4:30 PM. Jackson and Whitehall: Wed., Fri., and Sat. 6:30 AM – 4:30 PM. To find out about holiday closings, see <http://www.co.washington.ny.us/hours.htm#Solid> or call 746-2440 x6.

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