

Chicago's Recycling Ordinance: a two-way street

BY BRITTANY KING

The new Chicago Recycling ordinance has officially taken effect as of Jan. 1. The ordinance is not exactly complicated and for most tenants, absolutely nothing will change while others will simply have to adapt to separating their waste into a blue bin.

On the surface, the ordinance is a great way for the city to ensure that everyone is doing their part in recycling. But the question is: is the city doing their part?

Let's start with basics of the new ordinance. It states that beginning in 2017, all property owners of multi-unit residential, office, and commercial establishments must provide source-separated, single-stream recycling (the most common collection method in the industry). This is just to make sure everyone has separated recyclable materials from waste before collection.

But the law doesn't end there. In addition to equipping indoor and outdoor common areas with recycling containers, property owners must now have an ongoing educational program complete with signs, adequate carts, and written notice about the ordinance to all tenants.

The ordinance strives to encourage better recycling practices by enforcing stricter penalties to those who do not abide. The Chicago Dept. of Streets and Sanitation (DSS) handles enforcement which will include a 30-day warning period with graduated penalties for non-compliance following inspection. DSS will charge owners \$500-\$1,000 for their first offense, \$1,000-2,500 for a second offense within a year, and \$2,500-5,000 for third time offenses and each subsequent offense within a year of the most recent violation.

The rules of recycling also state that if any non-recyclable material is found in recycling bins, the full contents of the recycling bin will be deemed "infected" and dumped in the normal waste stream and the owner will be charged accordingly.

And there in lies the risk for North Side residents and condo association management. Few people may realize just how easy it is to contaminate - infect - recy-

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clable garbage.

For instance, throw some plastic bubble wrap, wire hangers or Chicago's biggest contaminant -- old plastic grocery bags -- into the blue bin and shazam, your garbage has been 'infected.'

The new ordinance basically means that property owners must have a tight plan for recycling that everyone in the household or condo association follows or else they have to (literally) pay the price — but note there is no penalty for placing recyclable material into normal waste containers.

And since most blue bins sit out in the open in Chicago alleys 365 days a year, recycling bins can be contaminated by passersby who put garbage into other people's bins. It is not clear if that might be an accepted defense for the city's high fines.

"You put all of the correct things in that blue cart. You go back in your house. And then, some schmuck walking down the alley eating a cheeseburger decides he doesn't like it and throws

it in your blue cart," DSS Commissioner Charles Williams told the Chicago Sun Times. "How do I penalize that resident when they had no idea that someone had put some contaminated food item in their cart? It becomes very difficult to penalize fairly," he said. "That's a challenge."

Mayor Rahm Emanuel has been pushing for stricter regulations on recycling during his tenure as mayor. In 2011, Emanuel implemented a managed competition for recycling services in order to create efficiency and lower operation costs for taxpayers. Then in 2013 Chicago expanded its blue cart program and began bi-weekly recycling collection for single family homes, two-flat, three-flat, and four-flat buildings. The 2017 ordinance is essentially the mayor's strictest crackdown on recycling yet, but it seems odd that the tight regulations are so focused on property owners and not so much on the actual waste management facilities.

Needless to say, it's not a crazy idea that property owners should be implementing recycling pro-

List of items residents should not put into their recycling bins:

- Plastic bags
- Styrofoam
- Hangers
- Glass other than bottles and jars
- Electronics
- Cords
- Lightbulbs
- Coffee Cups and other cups
- Greasy cardboard (like pizza boxes)
- Napkins

grams, but the issue really lies in the city's hands. So much of what's disposed of ends up rejected at the waste sorting facility, and this is where it gets hard to place blame.

The city has three sorting facilities where humans and machines sort through tons of cardboard, plastic items, cans, glass, paper and other recyclables that can all be sent off to be reused or repurposed. On the North Side one is located at Ashland and the Chicago River.

Articles coated with too much food, paper soaked from rain water, and miscellaneous vinyl or rubber items get nixed. This means roughly 20% of material that ends up at waste management facilities never leaves because it can't actually be recycled. This number is high, especially now that the

city is putting so much pressure on property owners for failing to recycle.

Then there the was the arrest and indictment last month of Brian Brundage, former owner of Intercon Solutions Inc. and current owner of EnviroGreen Processing LLC. He was arrested last month for operating a multi-million dollar scheme reselling potentially dangerous electronic waste overseas. The charges against Brundage bring even more unease to the new ordinance and again questions why the city is so concerned about the sorting process when the end game is all the same.

Why crack down so heavily on property owners when so much of their waste won't actually be recycled? It's time to get to the bottom of the real issue and figure out where it's necessary to point fingers. It's hard to stop something like rain water from contaminating items, so maybe that means it's time for the city to find an alternative to the blue bins.

As for issues such as items being caked in food, does this simply come from a lack of knowledge from the tenants and property owners? Perhaps the ordinance's educational rule will help lower the number of these contaminated items, but really only time will tell how helpful this will end up being. It could certainly be an expensive learning process, and it may be time for facilities to discard ambiguous recycling labels and start being crystal clear on their expectations. More explicit expectations would seem to only lead to a more efficient recycling program.

If you take the new ordinance at face value, it appears to be a strict yet efficient way in fixing the ongoing Chicago recycling issue. Dig a little deeper and you'll find that cracking down on tenants and property owners doesn't solve much if in the end everything ends up in a landfill.

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According to Poole, the McPherson School did not come to a consensus on Binny's waiver request after the principal, Local School Council and a school Friends group studied the proposal for about two months. "The alderman has asked [the developers] to go back to the drawing board," said Poole.

Poole said his office would need "clear consensus" from McPherson before asking for the neighborhoods' approval. Binny's would then have to get approval of the school and nearby neighbors before submitting its request to the state legislature through the office of State Rep. Greg Harris [13th].

And that approval looks unlikely. A number of neighbors aren't sure they need another liquor store and it's a safe bet that the four small, independent retail package liquor stores that currently operate on Lawrence Ave. mere steps to the east and west of the proposed Binny's will be voting 'nay' if asked about the proposal.

One woman told DNAinfo she's "not thrilled" by the prospect of another liquor store moving into the neighborhood, noting the

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