

# Sierra Club Montgomery County Zero Waste Campaign Update - January 2022

## Sierra Club Volunteers Tour Shady Grove Recycling Center



*Photo by Amy Maron*

On December 10, 2021, Sierra Club members toured the Shady Grove Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) in Derwood, the first official in-person group tour since 2020. The MRF was built in 1991 at a cost of \$9 million. In 2002 it underwent a \$3 million renovation in which the present system was installed. The recycling facility and fiber line sit on 40 acres. The county and Maryland Environmental Services, which operates the facility, employ 57 staff there.

The MRF processes 300 tons of recyclables per day including 200 tons of paper and 100 tons of commingled materials (plastic, glass, aluminum). These materials come from single-family and multi-family homes as well as businesses and institutions.

Our tour was led by Mr. Lonnie Heflin, Chief of the Materials Management Section, Recycling and Resource Management Division, within the Department of Environmental

Protection. According to Heflin, the MRF can no longer handle the amount of recycling brought in every day. Each week, nineteen unsorted loads of recycling (about 13-19 tons), or 40 percent of our recycling, is trucked to a single-stream processing facility in Pennsylvania – that’s costing taxpayers about \$1 million a year. The county’s capital budget includes funding for an engineering study to overhaul and modernize the MRF with robotic optical sorting equipment which will obviate the need for human sorters – a very dangerous job!

### Knowing what Types of Plastics can be Recycled

Most people know how to recycle paper and aluminum, but plastic materials continue to cause confusion. All plastic containers labeled with the numbers 1-7 inside the chasing arrows, except #6 are accepted for recycling in Montgomery County’s curbside blue bin program. Don’t forget to rinse them and remove the caps, tops or lids; as long as these are 2x2 inches or larger, they can also go in the blue bin. Plastic film (e.g., plastic bags, mailers, and bubble wrap), however, cannot go in the blue bins because it gets tangled in the sorting machines and the county cannot recycle it. And, no recycling should be placed inside of plastic bags.

You can find answers to your detailed recycling questions on the [DEP recycling web page here](#).

Contamination continues to be a large problem, particularly from medical waste: The county notes that sources of contamination include masks, dialysis bags, needles, surgical tubing, and IV bags. Other problematic items have included weapons, cell phones, propane cylinders, and lithium ion batteries, which are “like bombs,” because they can cause explosions when crushed.

### Progress in Reducing Single-Use Disposable Plastics

In 2019, the latest year for which the county publishes data, 24,000 tons of plastic bottles were recycled in the county – that’s a disappointing 13 percent! The single-family household rate is 33 percent, but the multi-family and the non-residential rates are **only one percent!** The other most common recyclable plastic type – plastic tubs and lids – has a 20 percent recycling rate. Most plastics that aren’t recycled in the county end up being burned in the county incinerator, where they emit toxic air pollutants and contribute to climate change.

The most effective solution to increasing the recycling rate of single-use plastic bottles is through a refundable deposit on beverage containers, which is in effect in ten states, but not yet in Maryland, because the beverage industry has consistently blocked its passage. The states that have beverage deposit programs have achieved recycling rates of up to 90 percent. Sierra Club's Maryland Chapter is working hard on legislation to initiate a beverage container deposit program in our state. You can read our national position in support of "bottle bills" [here](#).

At the local level, we can take multiple actions to reduce single-use plastics. In 2020, with Sierra Club's strong support, the county council enacted laws to ban plastic straws and #6 plastic containers (also known as "Solo" cups). We believe that legislation is also needed to require food service businesses to only provide utensils, napkins and condiments "on request," especially when customers are eating indoors or taking food home.

### Will 2022 be the Year that We End Waste Incineration?

After promising since taking office to end the county's reliance on waste incineration, County Executive Marc Elrich sent a letter to the county council stating his goal to "close the incinerator within the next 12-18 months and to put in place alternatives for processing our waste materials." Further, he stated, "[h]aving the incinerator has kept the focus on its continued operation and detracted from an incentive to consider innovative approaches used elsewhere."

To make the transition, the DEP has issued a Request for Information from waste companies interested in operating the Shady Grove Transfer Station, along with acceptance, processing, transportation and disposal of approximately 600,000 annual tons of solid waste (not including recycling). You can read the RFI [here](#).

As detailed in the report, "[Beyond Incineration: Best Waste Management Strategies for Montgomery County Maryland.](#)" we have a unique opportunity to end burning our trash and transition to more environmentally sustainable zero waste programs. We will monitor the progress made in reviewing these proposals to ensure that equity, pollution, and climate change impacts are fully considered. We will also likely need the help of county residents to show support for the efforts to close the incinerator and improve our recycling and waste management programs.

### Diverting More Food Waste



*Photo by Amy Maron*

In 2019, about 123,000 tons of food scraps that should have been composted were sent to the incinerator. In addition, a portion of the 52,000 tons of non-recyclable paper thrown away may be food paper that could have also been composted.

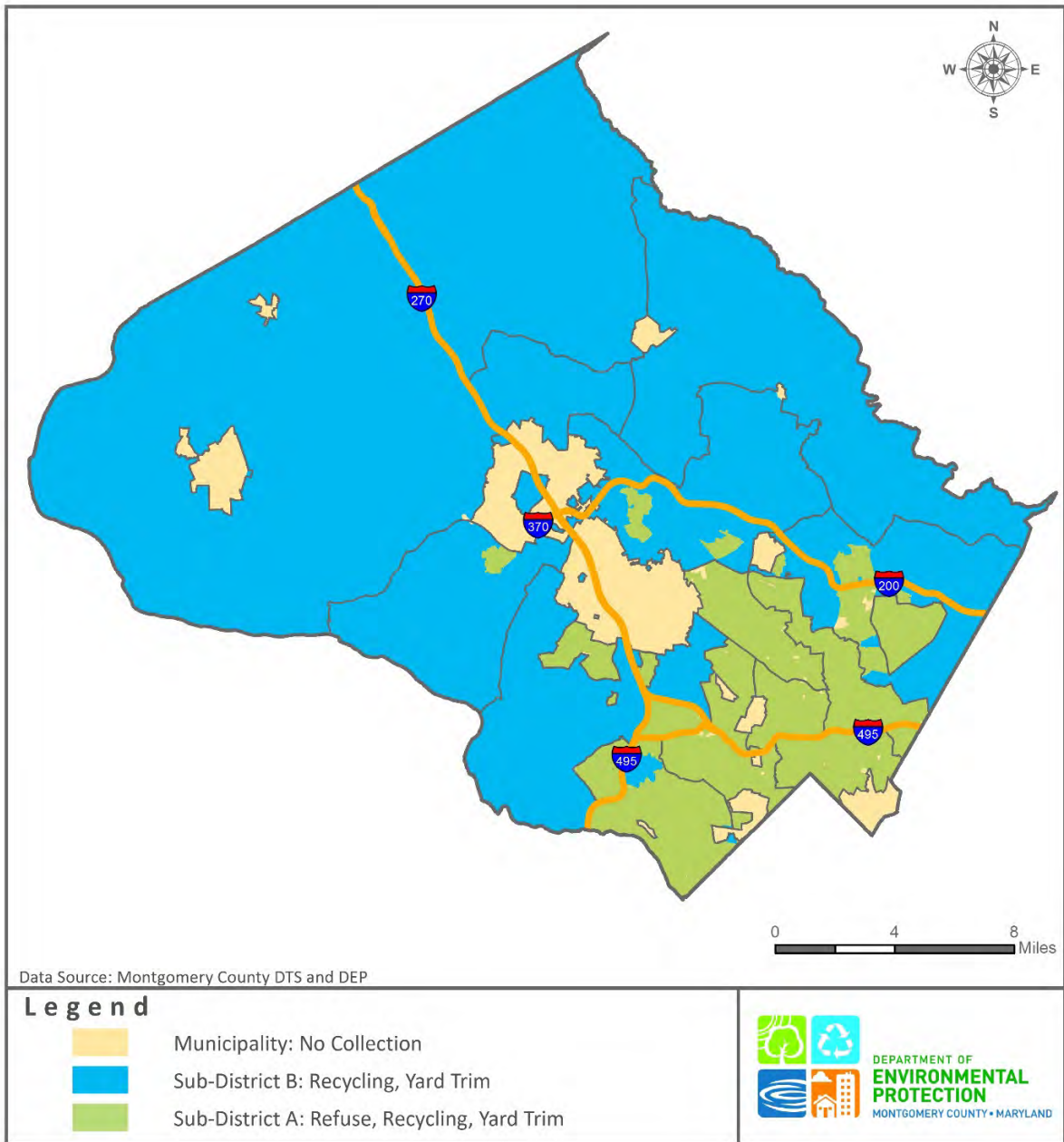
Pictured above is one of the two trucks the county purchased for its commercial food scraps collection program. The truck collects food waste from a number of restaurants and food service preparers and providers around the county and at Westfield Montgomery Mall, transporting it to the Western Branch Composting Facility in Prince George's County where it is transformed into "Leaf Gro Gold," a composting material highly valued by landscapers and gardeners and which sells out quickly each year. The goal is to enable these businesses – and many others – ultimately to cover the full costs of collection for composting through contracts with local businesses..

On the residential side, the county is also operating a pilot program of curbside food scrap collection in two neighborhoods. The results of this pilot will be used to inform the structure of a county-wide curbside collection for single-family homes. Many residents are also participating in backyard composting by testing out two types of composting containers which have been provided to residents for free by the county.

Sierra Club strongly supports efforts to remove the food scraps from the waste stream and divert it into compost. Other actions we support can be found in the [Strategic Plan to Advance Composting, Compost Use, and Food Scraps Diversion in Montgomery County, MD. Final. April 2018.](#)

However, just removing the food scraps alone from the waste system will not be enough to incentivize residents to reduce waste. That is why Sierra Club Montgomery County is pushing officials to transition our waste collection system to a unit-based system instead of a flat-fee system financed through property tax charges. With a unit-based system, also called “save-as-you-throw,” or “pay-as-you-throw,” residents pay directly for the *amount of trash* they place at the curb by purchasing either carts or bags of varying sizes. Unit-based pricing is a proven method used in many communities around the country to reduce overall waste disposal, including cities like Seattle, Minneapolis and San Francisco. The smaller the cart or bag, the less they have to pay. This is exactly how we pay for our electricity, gas and water.

### Montgomery County’s Crazy Quilt of Trash Collection



Montgomery County has had the same trash collection system in place since 1992, although the patterns of housing growth and waste diversion goals have changed significantly. In Subdistrict A, shown in green above, the county contracts with three private haulers to collect both trash and recyclables once per week. Within Subdistrict

A, all single-family homes in the same neighborhood receive trash, yard waste, and recycling collection on the same day of the week.

In Subdistrict B, a vast area represented by the blue area above, the county contracts with private haulers to collect only recyclables once per week. All single-family homes in the same neighborhood receive recycling collection on the same day of the week. For trash collection, however, residents in Subdistrict B must contract directly with a licensed private hauler. Different haulers may collect trash from different homes in the same neighborhood, leading to an inefficient system that puts additional trucks on the roads and creates unnecessary traffic, pollution, noise, and safety issues.

Montgomery County's "Zero Waste Task Force," a task force formed to provide advice and guidance on how best to maximize waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and sustainable management of all materials, also noted in its summary recommendations that "[a] majority of Montgomery County residents now live in Subdistrict B. Further, the task force warned, "failure to have a unified waste and recycling collection system hampers overall progress toward zero waste goals." It recommended that "Montgomery County should consolidate Subdistrict B with Subdistrict A in order to have a uniform waste and recycling system in the county that optimizes recovery potential." Montgomery County's Solid Waste Advisory Committee has also advocated for county-contracted collection.

According to a 2019 council-commissioned report on waste collection services, "The current subdistrict structure is a legacy of policies from the mid-20th Century. At that time, the areas that did and did not receive county-contracted trash collection service were more distinct from each other in terms of population density and land use. In more densely populated areas, the county contracted for trash collection, whereas in less populated areas, homeowners arranged for trash collection on their own. Today, the suburban and urban land use characteristics of many parts of Subdistricts A and B are more similar to each other." The report further states that "if starting with a clean slate, [it] would recommend County-contracted collection for all single-family homes (the Subdistrict A model) because of the inherent inefficiency of the Subdistrict B model."

**Are you a resident of Subdistrict B who is tired of seeing multiple trash trucks in your neighborhood on any given day? Do you receive once-weekly trash collection while your neighbor gets it twice a week? Do you want to see uniformity in the way trash is collected throughout the county? The Sierra Club wants to hear from you. Please contact zero waste lead, Amy Maron at [amy.maron@mdsierra.org](mailto:amy.maron@mdsierra.org) and let us know your story.**

## Help us Set Waste Reduction Priorities for 2022

We need your ideas about which zero waste priorities Sierra Club should advance before the DEP and county council. Please contact Amy Maron, Zero Waste lead, at [amy.maron@mdsierra.org](mailto:amy.maron@mdsierra.org) with your suggestions and if you would like to join the Zero Waste Team.

## Recent Articles Highlighting the Plastics Problem

[Rebecca Altman, "Five Myths About Plastics," Washington Post, January 14, 2022.](#)

[The Big Problem with Plastic](#) By Kevin Loria, [Consumer Reports](#), September 8, 2021.