

No green to go green

Published: Monday, October 18, 2010 at 9:37 a.m.

It's no surprise that some people say they want to save the planet, but ask them to spend some green to do it, and their attitudes change.

Take Terrebonne Parish government's proposed curbside recycling program, for instance. I heard lots of people proclaim what a great idea it was until the parish asked residents to pay for the privilege.

Specifically, the parish wants residents to sign up to have their household paper, plastics and aluminum picked up and trucked to a Baton Rouge recycling service. Supposedly, the garbage would get sorted and sold to manufacturers who would make new products with it, saving space in landfills.

Curbside pickup would cost homeowners a \$40 a year — \$10 every three months. The parish has set a goal: If 10,000 people sign up in a to-be-determined "service area," local government will launch the service.

After a month or so, 600 people have signed up.

Where are all the save-the-Earth do-gooders? Why are so few people willing to spend 11 cents a day to make the Good Earth a less polluted place?

Well, count me among the unwilling. I'm still thinking about it, but it's unlikely anything will persuade me. I've long harbored serious doubts about whether recycling is anything but a feel-good program that costs more money and energy than it's worth. Study the issue and you'll find conflicting reports on whether recycling keeps enough waste out of landfills to justify the fossil fuels, human energy and cost of picking up household garbage, sorting it and putting it to use. Other reports say the market for recycled materials is so limited that recyclers have trouble selling it. The result: Much of the trash ends up in landfills anyway.

Among the staunchest critics of curbside recycling is the libertarian and sometimes-conservative-leaning Cato Institute. The think tank's studies contend that there is neither a shortage of landfill space nor the raw materials, with the possible exception of aluminum, that such efforts purport to address.

"Recycling has been sold as a civic act of spiritual atonement for the high standards of living that we engage in," Jerry Taylor, Cato's director of natural resource studies, told ABC news in a March story about New York City's plans to temporarily halt curbside recycling to help cope with financial troubles. "One way to atone for these terrible sins we inflict on the planet is to sort our plastic from our paper from our tin. It's an easy way for people to feel better and helps us assuage some of that guilt."

There may be some value to a feel-good program; maybe it's a way to at least start doing something worthwhile for the planet. However, given the costs and dubious environmental benefits, I can think of higher priorities government could address with my money.

Residents' reluctance to part with their green is only one reason curbside recycling stands little chance of getting off the ground in Terrebonne. Parish officials have set their subscriber threshold so high that it will probably never be reached. Terrebonne



has about 40,000 households, census figures show, which means one in four would have to sign up, presumably in a relatively dense area, before officials will launch curbside recycling. Deduct renters and apartment dwellers and you're down to about 30,000 households. It's unlikely that one in three will sign up for paid recycling.

Copyright © 2010 HoumaToday.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.

Even in communities where homeowners do agree to pay for recycling, most don't use the service. A Times-Picayune story last month, headlined "Recycling proves elusive — and expensive — for some local parishes," cites Jefferson Parish as an example. Before Hurricane Katrina, when the parish offered the service, only about one in three homeowners actually used it, about the national average.

So, if money's not the problem, laziness is.

This is not the first time Terrebonne residents have said no when asked to pay for recycling. A test program years ago failed to attract interest after residents in parts of Houma were asked to pay a nominal fee.

Lafourche Parish government once offered curbside recycling but scrapped it in 2005 because it costs so much. The city of Thibodaux offers curbside recycling and makes up at least some of the cost by passing it on to homeowners through their regular garbage-collection fees.

I asked a few coworkers whether they would pay \$40 a year for curbside recycling. Most said no.

"I don't have to," said one. "I live in Thibodaux, so I get it for free."

I'm sure a lot of people share the mistaken belief that they get government services for free, blissfully unaware of the taxes and fees they or somebody else pays for them.

It's nice of those city officials in Thibodaux to offer curbside recycling for "free." Heck, maybe that's the secret. If Terrebonne offered it for free, everybody would want to recycle.

In the meantime, if you want to recycle for "free," you can always drive your plastic, paper and aluminum garbage to one of the big bins across Terrebonne Parish. (Shh, don't tell anybody, but it costs the parish about \$100,000 a year in tax money and garbage fees to provide this free service.)

And if you live in Terrebonne and feel strongly enough about saving the planet to spend \$40 a year on the cause, you can register online at www.tpcg.org/recycling, e-mail recycling@tpcg.org or call 873-6767.

Executive Editor Keith Magill can be reached at 857-2201 or keith.magill@houmatoday.com.