

OUR OPINION: Uncertainty argues against expanding recycling

There's enough doubt about recycling's effectiveness to prompt skepticism about paying more.

By: Tom Dennis – June 16, 2013

Google the words "recycling not worth it," and the search engine will return nearly 6 million results. They range from John Tierney's influential 1996 article, "Recycling is garbage," in the *The New York Times* magazine, to and beyond "Recycling Reconsidered," the 2012 book by Samantha MacBride, an assistant professor of public policy at Baruch College in New York City.

A reviewer sums up one of MacBride's conclusions this way: "She argues that recycling and economic development and zero waste activists are wasting their time. The movement really has not made a significant impact."

So, does this mean "recycling is garbage," as Tierney put it? No. Recycling advocates can find plenty of counterexamples to the ones mentioned above.

When it means is that 30 years after the recycling movement began, the topic remains complicated and in many ways, unsettled.

That's the "environment" in which the Grand Forks City Council now is debating whether to expand the city's recycling program.

Passions and convictions run high on this issue. Just ask council members Tyrone Grandstrand or Terry Bjerke, who argue from absolute opposite sides.

Given that fact, and given the fact that the local debate is the national debate in miniature, council members should think hard before they give their views the force of law.

That's especially true for the pro-recycling members, who'd like Grand Forks taxpayers to buy 60- or 90-gallon recycling bins for every household.

Are the members so sure "recycling works" that they're willing to force every homeowner not only to pay for a recycling program -- that's already happening -- but also to pay about \$1.50 a month more?

Recycling is a difficult issue, contrary to the claims on both sides. Couple that with the fact that few Grand Forks residents complain about taxes being too low, and you've got a case where city leaders should be very sure of themselves before they vote for the more-expensive option -- \$781,000 vs. \$528,000 a year.

Most arguments about recycling fall along partisan lines -- liberals for, conservatives against. (The Onion is harder to categorize, but this 1997 headline from the satirical news service -- "EPA: Recycling eliminated more than 50 million tons of guilt in '96" -- is worth quoting no matter what.)

But there are exceptions to the partisan trends. For example, "Recycling Reconsidered" author MacBride accepts the liberal argument that America's resource use and waste consumption are serious problems.

The trouble, she argues, is that recycling makes those problems worse. It does this by lulling Americans into believing they're making a difference, while letting manufacturers off the hook and encouraging the very overconsumption -- think bottled water vs. tap water -- that's causing the problems in the first place.

So, when it comes to waste as measured in metric tons, "it is fair to say that solutions to solid-waste problems today are not achieving outcomes in a materially meaningful way," MacBride writes.

Here's another contrarian view, this time from the conservative side. As recently as June 3, the libertarian Cato Institute carried a free-market argument explaining why mandatory recycling may be justified.

Justified? For most items, landfilling costs less than recycling; and for conservatives, that means landfilling wins and recycling loses. Right?

Wrong, argues Michael Munger, professor of public policy and economics at Duke University, in the online journal, Cato Unbound. The trouble is, "we charge far less for landfill disposal than it actually costs society," because charging the full cost would encourage people to illegally burn or dump their trash for "free."

So, recycling may very well cost less than the full social cost of landfilling. "And that, my friends, is why mandatory recycling may be justified," Munger writes in the libertarian group's journal.

Again, the point is not that Munger's right or MacBride's wrong. The point is, it's complicated. Complicated enough for liberals and conservatives to disagree, even among themselves. Complicated enough for a debate to last 20-plus years with no clear resolution in sight.

Complicated enough for recycling's costs and benefits to be opaque rather than transparent.

And all things considered -- though this, too, is a difficult call -- complicated enough for Grand Forks to avoid spending an extra \$253,000 a year.