

Headed for the garbage heap

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Columnist

Published: Sunday, November 6, 2011 at 6:01 a.m.

I'm neither surprised nor disappointed that few Terrebonne Parish residents are interested in launching a curbside recycling program.

For more than a year, officials have asked residents interested in paying \$40 a year to sign up on local government's website. At least 10,000 of the parish's roughly 110,000 residents would have to enroll — all in a specified area — to cover the cost of collecting and hauling plastic, paper and metal waste to a recycling plant in Baton Rouge.

By last week, 1,078 people had signed up, and Parish President Michel Claudet, who has promoted the program, said he will ask the Parish Council early next year to decide whether to continue recruiting or scrap the idea.

The lackluster interest was predictable, and I said so about a year ago in a column titled "No green to go green." In it, I noted that lots of people will proclaim they want to "save the planet," but ask them to spend some green to do it, and their attitudes change.

In this case, Terrebonne residents are unwilling to spend the equivalent of 11 cents a day to recycle their garbage. I suspect the biggest reason is simple: People would rather spend their money on something else. The average American cable bill, for instance, costs about \$75 a month, and I'm sure far more than 10,000 households in Terrebonne Parish willfully pay that or more for TV. Priorities.

A few, including me, may have deeper reservations about recycling's value — or lack of it. 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.

Clemson University Economics Professor Daniel K. Benjamin produced one of the most convincing cases in a 2003 essay called "Eight Great Myths of Recycling." In it, he uses hard facts to show that many beliefs used to support recycling, however well-intended, are false, misguided or misplaced. America is not, for instance, running out of landfill space — not by a longshot. Nor is the country — or the world — running out of natural resources.

The libertarian and sometimes-conservative-leaning Cato Institute's studies show much the same.

"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 2010 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."

Penn and Teller, the popular comedy duo, put it more simply their irreverent, myth-busting TV series on the Showtime cable network. The episode is titled: "Recycling is Bullsh**."

Benjamin's studies figure prominently into the episode, which posits that recycling is a waste of time and money that fails to justify even the warm and fuzzy feeling it gives to people who do it because that feeling is based on falsehoods.

"If you want to feel good while doing something stupid and wasting your time, maybe heroin is for you," Penn Jillette suggests.

Some environmentalists, economists and politicians suggest that better alternatives exist, actions that cut pollution at a far greater and less costly rate than recycling. Among them: composting yard and food wastes, reusing instead of discarding computers and other working electronics, buying less bottled water and driving less.

If you disagree with these theories, and want to back your beliefs with \$40 a year, you can register for Terrebonne's proposed curbside recycling program at www.tpcg.org/recycling, e-mail recycling@tpcg.org or call 873-6767.

In the meantime, if you want to recycle, you can always drive your plastic, paper and aluminum garbage to one of the big bins across Terrebonne Parish. Oh, and don't tell anybody, but it costs the parish about \$100,000 a year in tax money and garbage fees to provide this service. Lots of people think it's "free," but you're smart enough to realize that's a myth.

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