

Sustainable Scarborough: Recycling habits improve, but there's still work to do

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Over the summer, the Town embarked on a new recycling outreach program where interns were hired to check recycling carts on our Tuesday collection route. For eight weeks between June and August, the interns lifted lids on recycling carts to make sure they only contained items that could be recycled. Carts were then marked with a colored tag based on what they contained:

- **GREEN** tags meant you're doing a great job recycling!
- **YELLOW** tags meant the cart contained a few items that were not recyclable.
- **RED** tags meant the cart contained too many items that are not recyclable and were not picked up that week.

During the outreach program, we were happy to see recycling habits improve! The number of carts tagged with **green tags increased** from 52% at the beginning of the program to 84% at the end of the program, and the number of carts tagged with **yellow tags decreased** from 42% to 10%. Carts tagged with **red tags stayed about the same** throughout the eight-week program.

Data from ecomaine also showed better recycling habits. The amount contamination, or items in recycling carts that can't be recycled, decreased from 26% before the program to 19% at the end of the program. Ecomaine rejects recycling loads that have more than 26% contamination. Rejected recycling loads are processed like trash and cost the Town a lot more than clean recycling loads. In July and August 2018, ecomaine rejected 67 of our recycling loads because they contained too many items that could not be recycled. In July and August 2019, only 10 of our recycling loads were rejected.

It's encouraging to see recycling habits improve, but there's still more we can do to recycle better. The biggest change we can make is to **keep plastic bags out of recycling carts**, including putting recyclables loose in the cart, not bagged. Plastic bags, plastic wrap, and bagged recycling accounted for more than 50% of the contamination our interns saw in recycling carts. Plastic bags get tangled in ecomaine's sorting machinery and lead to delays and increased costs when the sorting system needs to be shut down to remove the bags.

Recycling right isn't only good for the environment, it's also good for the Town's budget. By putting the correct items in recycling carts, we can keep our waste disposal costs down and ensure our recyclables are recycled. [Learn what items can go in recycling carts here](https://www.ecomaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DODONT-Updated-Feb-2019.pdf) (<https://www.ecomaine.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/DODONT-Updated-Feb-2019.pdf>).



Plastic bags tangled in ecomaine's sorting machines.