

MiSustainable Holland

About this series

The MiSustainable Holland column is a collection of community voices sharing updates about local sustainability initiatives.

This Week's Sustainability Framework Theme:

Community Knowledge: The collective knowledge and energy of the community is an incredible resource that must be channeled to where it is needed.

Cameras and computers will help improve Holland recycling rates

By Marianne Manderfield
City of Holland

What do high-tech cameras, global positioning systems, and computers have to do with recycling? It turns out quite a bit.

This technology will help educate Holland's residential recycling customers about items not accepted in their curbside recycling bins. Non-accepted items, also known as contaminants, include polystyrene foam, construction, trash, and large metal items like lawnmowers.

A lot of these items seem as though they can and should be recycled, but unfortunately, these types of items are not recyclable in your curbside cart. We all can have good intentions to recycle everything, but when contaminants are added, sorting them out of the load costs extra time and money.

The City of Holland is rolling out an education campaign for residential recycling customers through a grant from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) and The Recycling Partnership. The goal is to reduce the overall contamination rate in Holland's residential recycling.

Through the grant, Holland has partnered with Republic Services and Prairie Robotics to utilize their technology, high-tech cameras, global positioning systems, and computers on recycling trucks used in the city. This technology will scan loads dumped into the recycling trucks and be able to recognize contaminants, such as Styrofoam, plastic bags, or trash. It then will produce customized feedback via a postcard sent to individual households.

The postcards will help educate residents on how to recycle properly, telling what can be recycled in their cart and how they can decrease contamination. Eliminating contaminants will increase Holland's recycling rate and lower the contamination rate.

The City of Holland has a long-time commitment to recycling, going back decades. Then Holland rolled out curbside recycling bins to residential recycling customers in May 2022. Switching from the yellow bags to the bins greatly reduced contamination rates, down to 10 percent. At the same time, the community's participation rate has increased to 70 percent. Both of these rates are excellent, but can still be improved on. This technology will help everyone learn how to be better recyclers and help our community.

"Recycling properly saves our taxpayers money by reducing the cost of sending materials that could have been recycled to the landfill, supports jobs, and improves the health of the environment," City Sustainability Manager Dan Broersma said, explaining why low contamination rates are important.

"We know residents want to recycle the right way, and through this campaign, we are providing personalized, real-time feedback to help them do just that."

It's about improving community outcomes one household at a time. It's about MiSustainableHolland.

- *Marianne Manderfield is public information coordinator for the City of Holland.*