

Blame ‘Amazon Effect’ for proposed bump in S.F. garbage bills

By [Rachel Swan](#)

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Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Recology classifiers sift recyclables from non-recyclables at the Pier 96 plant.

San Francisco prides itself on being ecology-minded, having outlawed everything from plastic bags to foam meat trays. But those lofty environmental ideals are going up against a culture that’s increasingly focused on convenience.

Many city dwellers have little time to cook or shop, so they order meals and groceries online, and buy outfits from Internet styling services that deliver to their doorsteps. The fallout from these new forms of consumption is readily apparent in the lobbies of apartment buildings, which are often littered with boxes.

“We see the recycling stream on a daily basis, and it’s gone from gray to brown,” said Darryl Moses, operations manager at the 200,000-square-foot Hunters Point recycling plant run by the city’s long-standing waste and recycling hauler, Recology.

Years ago, residents’ bins were chock full of translucent glass and grayish newspapers, Moses said. Now they’re full of brown cardboard.

The increase in cardboard and other forms of packaging — cellophane, polystyrene, clamshell containers, puffy plastic shipping pillows — is part of what’s driving Recology to seek a 14 percent hike in the city’s garbage rates in July, which already has approval from Public Works. Residents have until Tuesday to appeal the increase to the three-person Refuse Rate Board before it is made final.

A spokesman for the company blames the so-called “Amazon effect” of too many residents buying their goods from Internet sites, instead of at brick-and-mortar stores. The detritus from shipping all these goods is overloading the waste stream, thwarting the “zero waste” goal of a city that last year enacted the most comprehensive polystyrene foam packaging ban in the country.

That law has helped cultivate San Francisco’s eco-friendly reputation, but it doesn’t apply to e-commerce sites based outside the city. Such sites have soared in popularity among residents who buy most of their clothes and household goods over the Internet.

“People here work long hours, so instead of cooking, they’re ordering online meal kits,” said Recology spokesman Robert Reed.

Meal kits from delivery services like Blue Apron are a recycler’s nightmare, because all the ingredients are individually wrapped. And they’re just one among many forms of Russian-doll packaging. Recology described the problem in its application for the rate increase, submitted to Public Works this year. It said the ballooning volume of San Francisco’s recyclables has forced the company to reconfigure its fleet, which currently has split-chamber trucks for recycling and trash, and single-chamber trucks for compost.

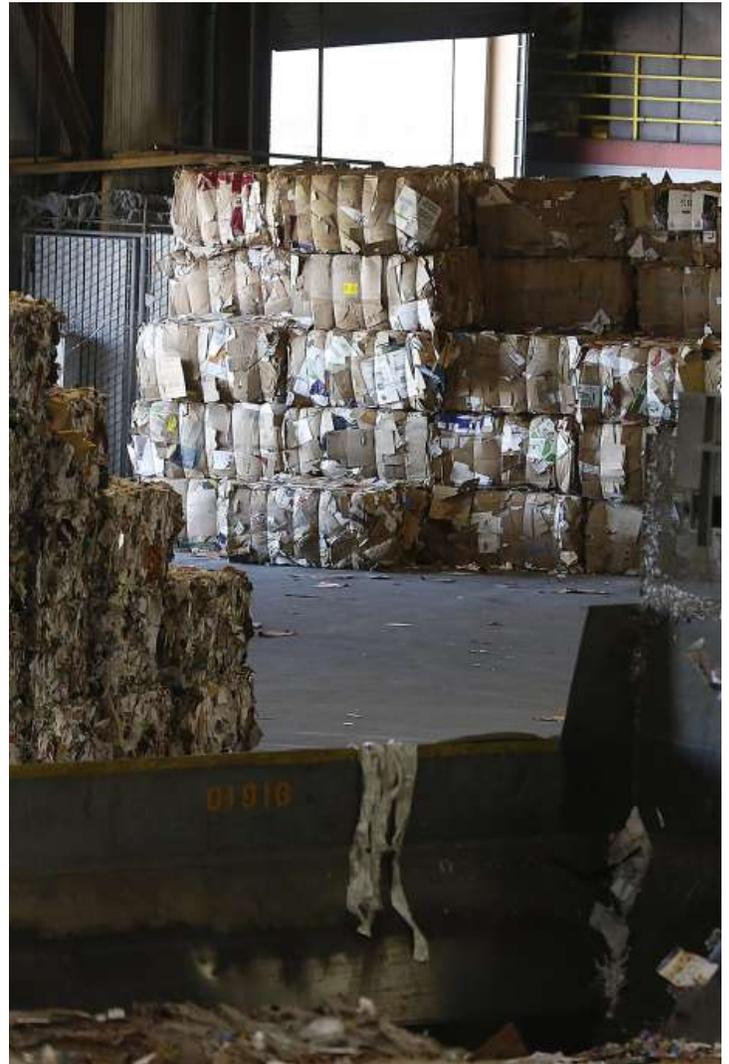


Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

Cardboard boxes packaged and ready to be taken for reuse at the Recology recycling plant on Pier 96 on Friday, May 19, 2017, in San Francisco, Calif.

Under the proposed redesign, Recology would use the single-chambers for recycling and the split-chambers for compost and trash. The company would also add 23 routes to collect all the debris from San Francisco's new businesses and apartment buildings.

"Recology actually had to flip the system on its head, because having half a truck to carry recyclables wasn't good enough any more," said Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council, a statewide network of city governments and organizations working to reduce waste.

"Those changes cost money, and it's not just the hard cost" of switching the trucks, Sanborn said, noting that a wholesale fleet redesign has labor costs, too. It consumes a lot of staff time to map out dozens of new routes.

She pointed out that San Francisco often serves as a place to test dramatic shifts in consumption. The congested streets make it a particularly difficult place to be a garbage and recycling hauler, so Recology had to react quickly to the recent avalanche of packing materials.

The swing from paper bags and newspapers to cardboard and plastic "went way higher and way faster in San Francisco" than in other cities, Sanborn said.

Collectively, residents throw 625 tons of material into their blue recycling bins each day — an amount that hasn't changed much in the past four years. Yet the materials have gotten bulkier and more complicated to sort. Water that used to come in a glass bottle now comes in a bottle made of three different kinds of plastic — one for the cap, one for the label and one for the container itself.

Add to that the plastic boxes for prewashed salads, or the San Francisco definition of "fast food": six dolmas in a clamshell container, rather than a paper-wrapped Quarter Pounder with cheese.

"The number of materials we're dealing with has increased significantly," Reed said, "and that's more significant than the tonnage."

Recology completed an \$11.6 million upgrade to its recycling center last year, adding a Willy Wonka-style maze of conveyer belts, chutes, optical scanners and other specialized machines from the Netherlands, which separate cardboard and plastic from other recyclables.

The new equipment has enabled Recology to divert more waste products. In the past six months, the center has sent only 6 percent of its recycling materials to the landfill — a significant improvement from 12 percent last year.



Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

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Trucks drop off recycled items including cardboard at the Recology recycling plant at Pier 96. Much of the cardboard once contained online orders.

But Recology's staff also has to contend with new kinds of packaging vessels, such as the nylon tote bags from Amazon's grocery delivery arm, AmazonFresh. Inside each bag is a foam container for food.

"These things are showing up at the recycling plant," Reed said. "And we have no idea what to do with them."

With questions building about how municipal waste systems will handle these excess containers and boxes, some online retailers are trying to be more conscientious.

"Our packaging is recyclable and we offer customers the option of returning our packaging to us for recycling free of charge through our returns program," a spokeswoman for Blue Apron wrote in an email to The Chronicle.

Other companies, such as Amazon, are shipping items in crinkled up paper, rather than foam packing peanuts, said Adam Gendell, associate director of the Virginia-based Sustainable Packing Coalition, which works with businesses to reduce waste.

In April, Target said it would work with suppliers to eliminate foam packaging, which is hard to recycle and often winds up in oceans.

While there's definitely an industry push for recyclable packing materials, few companies are trying to reduce packaging altogether, Gendell said. Most items are shipped in the same flashy containers that appear on store shelves, along with protective insulation for transport.

That could be a cautionary measure, Gendell said, because it hurts retailers when products break or food spoils before reaching its destination. But it could also be branding — to some companies, efficiency is less important than a well-designed box.

A spokeswoman from Amazon said that stripping off bulky, oversized store packaging is “the primary challenge” for an online retailer. But she said that Amazon has made a concerted effort to cut down on shipping materials, and that the company shaved off more than 55,000 tons of excess packaging last year.

To Reed, the steps that these companies are taking seem well-intentioned, but won't solve the problem in San Francisco.

The best solution, he said, is to do what your parents or grandparents did: buy things at the store and bring your own bag.

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