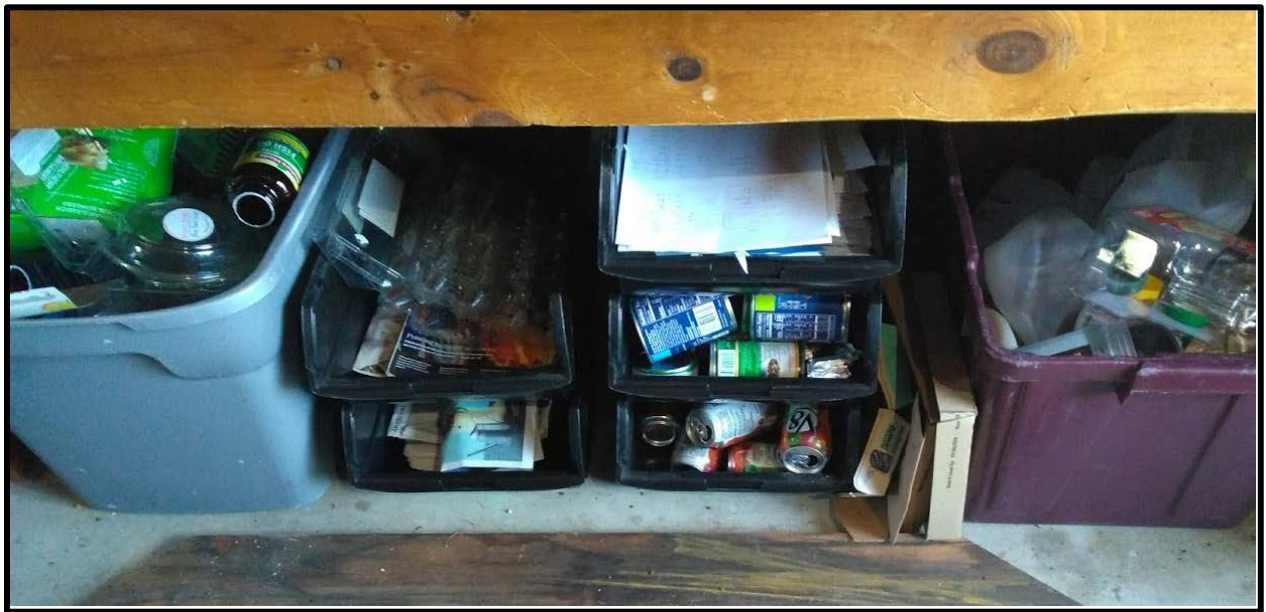


How does Lee NH recycle?



One Bin at a Time



A collection of E-Crier articles
commissioned by the
Lee Sustainability Committee

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Waste Not Want Not

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

This old adage – along with “a penny saved is a penny earned” – is as true today as ever. After all, who wants to throw away good money and resources? This is why the Sustainability Committee took a look at how much solid waste goes through the Lee Transfer Station.

Yes, this is related to the suggestion that we go to a Pay per Bag system, but we don’t know yet if that’s the right solution for Lee. In order to decide on a solution, we first need to understand the problem we’re trying to solve.

Problem: We’re throwing too much stuff into the municipal solid waste (MSW) bin at the Transfer Station (that’s the last bin in the line).

Are we sure this is the problem? What is the current condition, really? Short of having a volunteer or intern randomly (and confidentially) open half of the trash bags that go into that last bin (which other towns have done), how might we find out if we really are “throwing too much stuff” in that bin?

Here’s something that each household can do as a quick check – does your trash can contain things that could have been composted, recycled or handed down via the Swap Shop? If it does, you’re probably not alone.

“But,” you might ask, “so what? Why is it a problem that we throw these things in the solid waste bin?”

One part of the answer to that is the cost to the town (that is, to us taxpayers) to have our solid waste hauled to a landfill. It is the highest cost of all the bins at the Transfer Station. On the other hand, we EARN money when we recycle aluminum cans, plastics, steel cans, newsprint and corrugated cardboard. It COSTS a little to recycle glass, but this cost is lower than the cost of sending these materials to a landfill. Mixed paper sometimes earns and sometimes costs, depending on the paper market.

If we can move recyclables from the solid waste bin and into the appropriate recycling bins, we save money on the solid waste hauling, and usually make money overall. And if we compost what can be composted (either at home or via a service like Mr Fox), we reduce what we send to the landfill even more.

The other part of the answer is that we live on a planet with a certain amount of land area. We like to use land for many different things – places to live, places to grow food, places to work and play and places to maintain as is in their natural state. Using land for landfills limits our ability to use that land for another purpose.

We’ll continue to “talk trash” in a series of articles – stay tuned for more!

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I Know I Should Recycle, But...

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

If you're used to throwing everything into one trash can, then changing your habits to separate stuff out can feel inconvenient and even daunting. Here are some questions you might have.

Aren't landfills the same as compost piles – just bigger?

No, landfills aren't compost piles, which get turned so moisture and air support the natural decomposition of biodegradable waste. Landfills contain mostly non-biodegradable waste. The stuff in landfills takes a long time to break down, and the process produces liquid waste (leachate) and methane gas. In our area, UNH burns the methane collected at the Turnkey Landfill for energy.

How do I know my stuff is actually getting recycled?

This is a very good question, especially now that China and India have decided to refuse our refuse. Why should we go to the trouble of separating out our recyclables if they're just going to end up in a landfill anyway?

First, Lee residents who are already recycling are doing a very good job with it, as is the Transfer Station staff. Our recyclables are consistently very "clean" – the items themselves are clean (no food and such on them) and they are very accurately sorted into the appropriate bins. Cleanliness increases the likelihood that recycling facilities will take our stuff and actually recycle it. Also, for recyclables that Lee earns money for, we earn more because we keep it clean and sort well. For recyclables that we have to pay to have hauled, we pay less because we keep it clean.

Second, one way to reduce solid waste is to avoid packaging in the first place. Shop with reusable bags; buy loose produce; avoid treats that come in plastic wrappers and so on. If you don't buy it, you don't have to try to recycle it.

How clean is "clean enough" to garner the financial benefits of clean recyclables?

Never fear, we don't have to fully wash things so they're clean enough to eat off of. They just need to be "trash clean."

Plastic, glass and metal containers should be well rinsed – use soap if the container is greasy. If you do dishes by hand, you could swish your containers in the soapy sink after finishing the dishes.

Cardboard should not be greasy or have food stuck to it. Pizza boxes are notorious here.

I'm not sure I can fit all this into my already busy life.

We hear you. The key to making any change stick is usually to take it a little at a time. In an effort to help ease the change, we'll continue "talking trash" on the theme of reducing our solid waste one bin at a time.

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On Your Mark, Get Set...

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Reducing your solid waste, one bin at a time, begins with marking your current state and getting set for future habits.

Make note of how many gallons of solid waste you currently take to the Transfer Station (and how often). This will let you track your personal waste reduction as you add new habits.

Now get set to start (or amp up) your recycling game. If you're not currently composting or recycling, you might (nervously) wonder how many bins you're going to need. And where will you put them all?

These are good questions. Start with where you'll put them. It might make sense to put your recycling bins near your current trash bin, but each household will be unique.

Now decide how many bins you have room for. If you wanted to sort all of your recyclables at home into their own bins, then add compost buckets and the trash can(s) you already have, you could have a dozen or more bins! But that's probably overkill.

You're more likely to combine similar items in one bin and sort them out when you're at the Transfer Station. Try a few configurations to come up with a system that works for your household – what's easy to sort out at the Transfer Station, and what's better to sort at home so you can just dump out a bin all at once?

Here is one example, from left to right:



- 30 gal gray bin for bulky non-recyclable items
 - Magazines, egg containers (top tray)
 - Newsprint (bottom tray)
 - Mixed paper, single-ply cardboard (top tray)
 - Steel cans, aluminum foil/pie plates (middle tray)
 - Aluminum beverage cans (bottom tray)
 - Purple bin for all recyclable glass and plastic containers
 - Corrugated cardboard stashed between bins
- A compost bucket for plant-based food waste and a 13 gal regular trash can are in the kitchen.



We also have compostable bags for our meat-based garbage. We dump that in the Mr Fox composting tote at the Transfer Station.

Still overwhelmed? Try starting with these things: food waste, yard waste and aluminum beverage cans. These are the topics for our next articles.

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One Bin at a Time – Food Waste

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Imagine a 13 gallon kitchen trash can that's emptied once every eight weeks. Not eight days, eight *weeks*.

Your first thought is probably, “ew, that must stink!” It actually doesn't, because food waste is not allowed in the can. It's rotting food that makes trash stink, and it's the stink that prompts us to toss a trash bag, even if it's not full yet. If you're tossing bags before they're full, you're using more bags than you need to.

Now, imagine we have a Pay per Bag program in town. You'd want to use as few bags as possible, right? Well, if you're like most of us, you already are on a Pay per Bag program. You probably pay to buy bags at the store, so the more bags you use, the more you have to buy and the more you pay.

A friend once commented that trash bags are something we make whose sole purpose is to be thrown away. When we buy trash bags, we buy trash. Hmm.

If you want to make good use of your bags, you'll want to be sure they're full before you toss them. The first step to keeping bags until they're full is to get the stinky food waste out.

Beginner:

- Reduce the amount of food (and money) you waste. Check out “SavetheFood.com.”
- Pick up some compost bags at the Transfer Station. The Mr Fox compost tote where you toss full bags is usually just outside the building. (If you need to, you can freeze your bag of food waste until you have a chance to toss it in the tote.)

Intermediate:

- If a neighbor composts at home, ask if you can add your plant-based food waste to their pile.
- Bonus points: Offer to learn how to help care for your neighbor's compost pile.

Advanced:

- Start your own backyard compost pile. (Connect on any of the Facebook groups listed in this page's footer for composting tips and tricks.)
- Below: From kitchen bucket, to compost piles, to finished compost for the garden.



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One Bin at a Time – Yard Waste

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

If you've been in town for a while, you probably already know the answer to "what do I do with my yard waste?" But if you're new and are used to including bags of leaves and grass clippings with your curb-side pick-up, you might be wondering...

Yard waste doesn't go in the solid waste bin. As to where it does go, you might have some options depending on whether you have some woods on your property that can discreetly house a brush and debris pile (or two).

Grass clippings and dry leaves:

- Grass clippings and leaves can be composted, either at home or in the Transfer Station's yard waste area (where staff turns it into compost, free for the taking).
- A better and easier option is to get a mulching mower or a mulching blade for the mower you have. This chops the clippings and leaves into small pieces that shuffle down through the grass to the topsoil. There, it will compost in place, returning nutrients to your lawn and reducing the need to fertilize. Win-win!

Brush – If you have some woods on your property:

- Pick a spot or two for piles where they won't be an annoying sight for your neighbors.
- Make a pile for woody brush and a pile for less robust yard waste, like dead leaves and garden debris. Both piles will settle and break down over time.

Brush – If you don't have woods:

- Bring your woody brush to the Transfer Station's brush pile, which is just beyond the yard waste area, down the slope to the right. The town burns this brush.
- If you have a chipper at home, you can use your chipped wood as mulch on your property, or you can dump it in the Transfer Station's mulch pile, which is next to the compost pile.

Where the magic happens, on the right side of the Transfer Station building.



Yard waste



Compost and mulch – free!



Brush – down the slope

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One Bin at a Time – Aluminum Cans

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Aluminum beverage cans are one of the recyclable items that we earn the most money on. (Plastic #2 Natural is the other one. They vie with each other for the title of Biggest Earner.) Because aluminum is a basic metal resource, recycling these cans is as simple as melting them down and making something else out of them. Beverage can today, new can tomorrow. Or, airplane tomorrow. Or, something else. And this recycling can go on indefinitely with no loss of quality.

And, they're fairly simple to recycle – not too many ifs, ands or buts. So, let's just dive into it.

YES, please!	
<p>Earn: \$2000/ton (as of Q1 2022)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soda cans • Seltzer cans • Juice cans • “Adult beverage” cans • Regular cans • Short cans • Tall cans • Even bottle-shaped cans <p>As long as they're aluminum and once contained a beverage, they're good to go.</p>	

NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
Aluminum foil and pie plates; they get their own barrel near the steel cans.	
Aluminum food cans (pet or human); even though these are made of aluminum, they go in with the steel food cans.	
Metal caps can go in the bucket between the glass and steel can bins	

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One Bin at a Time – Plastics Primer

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

After aluminum cans, plastics are the next items that we earn the most money on when we recycle them, so that's the next natural stop on our journey to reduce our solid waste. Before we dive into what kinds of plastic we do and do not recycle in Lee, let's explore what, exactly, plastic is.

Plastic is made of various natural substances, with naphtha (which comes from the distillation of crude oil) being a key ingredient. Crude oil (along with other fossil fuels like coal and natural gas) is the remains of ancient plants that died out some 300 million years ago.

If plastic is made from natural ingredients, why does it get such a bad rap? After all, it has lots of benefits over other materials – it's water-proof, lightweight, flexible, strong, less likely to break when dropped, doesn't rust and so on.

All of these are benefits of plastics, which is why they are so popular. But here are some downsides:

- While the main ingredient in plastic (crude oil) is biodegraded plants, plastic itself is not biodegradable. Paper products, on the other hand, are biodegradable.
- Glass and metal are also not biodegradable, but they tend not to cause as much damage if they end up as litter. They don't blow around, getting caught in trees or ending up in large, floating masses of trash in the oceans.
- The fact that plastic items tend to float also increases the likelihood that marine animals will accidentally eat or get tangled in them. We humans can also end up eating "micro-plastics" when we eat fish.
- There's a set amount of crude oil on our planet. How much is there? 60 years' worth? 100? 1000? We could debate it, but the fact is that no one is claiming that this planet contains an unlimited amount of oil, or that it can replace what we use at least as quickly as we use it. This means there is a definite end date on our ability to make new plastics.
- While glass and metal can be recycled endlessly with no decrease in material quality, recycling plastic tends to degrade the quality of the material. At some point, the plastic can't be recycled anymore and it will most likely go to a landfill.

Aim to reduce the amount of plastic you use, and stay tuned for how to recycle plastics in Lee.



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One Bin at a Time – Plastic #2 Natural

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member




You probably already know that most plastic items have a little recycle triangle somewhere on it with a number (1-7) in the triangle. This number indicates the type of plastic (or resin) the thing is made of, but that doesn't explain why a traditional milk jug and a white "light-block" milk jug seem so different. They are both #2 plastic, right? And why is it we can recycle #1 bottles and jars, but not #1 boxes and "clam shells"?

Plastic manufacturers can take a type of resin and form it in a lot of different ways, each with its own look and functionality. This is why not all plastics with a particular number are the same.


For some basic info about what the numbers mean, see

<https://www.greenmatters.com/renewables/2018/09/13/ZG59GA/plastic-recycling-numbers-resin-codes>.

Then start with #2 natural – the easiest type of plastic that we can recycle here in Lee. It's also the type of plastic we earn the most on when we recycle it.

YES, please!	
Earn: \$1000/ton (as of Q1 2022) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk jugs • Water jugs • Vinegar bottles • Soap bottles <p>Any sort of bottle or jug that's a white-ish #2 that you can see through.</p>	
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<p>Plastic #2 mixed colors (#2 bottles and jugs that you can't see through). These get their own bin near the steel cans.</p>	
<p>Caps, which go in the trash.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – Plastic #2 Mixed Colors

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member


Now that you can recognize your #2 natural items (white-ish plastic that you can see through), it should be simple to identify your #2 mixed color plastics:

- They are #2 plastic
- They are opaque (you can't see through them)
- They come in just about any color you can imagine

Here's what goes in the #2 mixed color plastic bin.

YES, please!	
<p>Earn: \$320/ton (as of Q1 2022)</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Detergent bottles • Shampoo bottles • Coffee containers • Hand wipe containers • Motor oil bottles • White "light-block" milk jugs • Any color (except black) <p>Any sort of bottle, jug or container that's a #2 that you can't see through.</p>	
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<p>The white-ish #2 natural plastic that you can see through. These get their own bin.</p>	
<p>Really small pill and vitamin bottles. These are a little too sturdy. When in doubt, ask a Transfer Station staff person.</p> <p>Black plastic. The machines that recycle the plastic use electric eyes that can't tell the difference between the plastic and the conveyor belt.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – Plastic #1

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Ah, #1. The trickiest of the plastics we can recycle in Lee.

No doubt you've noticed a lot of #1 bottles, jars, boxes and "clam shells" in your life. You've also no doubt noticed that the bin for #1 plastic is only for bottles and jars – boxes and clam shells need not apply.

Why? This gets back to our earlier discussion about how plastic manufacturers can take a type of resin and form it in a lot of different ways, each with its own look and functionality. One big difference between #1 bottles/jars and #1 boxes/clam shells is that the boxes and clam shells melt more easily. If they're tossed in the recycling machine with the bottles and jars, they melt first and gum up the machine.

YES, please!	
Earn: \$360/ton (as of Q1 2022) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soda, water and mouthwash bottles • Cooking oil bottles • Peanut butter jars • Vitamin bottles • Any size (up to 2.5 gallons) • Any color (except brown) 	
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • #1 boxes and clam shells • #1 brown bottles <p>Ask your grocery store nicely if they will take back containers from items you purchased at their store. (And if these items actually get recycled.)</p>	
<p>Caps, which go in the trash.</p> <p>Anything over 2.5 gallons, like the 5 gallon bottles that go on water coolers. They are too big for the recycling machines to process, so they go in the trash.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – Steel Cans

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member


Whew! We're done with the tricky plastic items. Back to materials that are easier to recycle, but that we still make money on – steel (and aluminum) food cans.

Because these are basic metal resources, recycling steel and aluminum food cans is as simple as melting them down and making something else out of them. And this recycling can go on indefinitely with no loss of quality.

And, they're fairly simple to recycle – not too many ifs, ands or buts. So, let's just dive into it.

YES, please!	
<p>Earn: \$285/gross ton (as of Q1 2022) (A gross ton is 2240 pounds.)</p> <p>Steel cans, including spray cans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Must be completely empty and “trash clean” • Remove plastic buttons, caps and lids • You don't need to remove paper labels 	
<p>Aluminum food cans (pet or human); even though these are made of aluminum, they go in with the steel food cans.</p>	
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<p>Aluminum foil and pie plates; they get their own barrel near the steel cans.</p>	
<p>Caps and lids:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metal caps and lids can go in the bucket between the glass and steel can bins • Plastic caps, which go in the trash. 	

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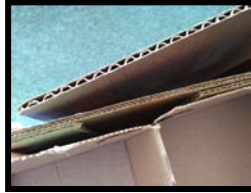




One Bin at a Time – Newsprint

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member


We now enter the realm of paper products – newsprint, corrugated cardboard, office paper, single-ply cardboard and magazines. These are all made from wood pulp, so they are natural, biodegradable items. They are also recyclable, to a point. Once a paper product can no longer be recycled, it can be composted. Let's start with newsprint.

Newsprint includes all gray news-papery paper, even if it hasn't been printed on. (Can we call unprinted newsprint “news-UN-print?”) Sometimes, this unprinted newsprint paper is used for wrapping fragile items at a store, or as padding in shipping boxes.

Newsprint (printed or not) has its own bin because we earn money to recycle it! If you're throwing it away, you're throwing away money.

YES, please!	
Earn: \$185/ton (as of Q1 2022) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspapers – with inserts is fine • Flyers and circulars printed on newsprint • Unprinted newsprint 	 
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
Corrugated cardboard (the kind with a ripply middle); that has its own bin, and we'll talk about it next. Brown paper also goes in the corrugated cardboard bin.	 
Mixed paper, magazines and single-ply cardboard have their own bin – we'll talk about that later.	  

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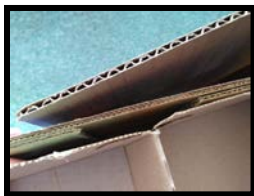









One Bin at a Time – Corrugated Cardboard

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Paper. Paper board. Wet pack/wet strength. Card stock. Cardboard. Corrugated cardboard. Such an array of paper products! Clearly, paper is the flimsy stuff, but at what point does paper become cardboard, and what makes some cardboard corrugated?

It's all about the ripples. Corrugated cardboard can be thin (like fast-food boxes), super-thick (like some packing materials) or anywhere in between. It's the ripples in the middle that make corrugated cardboard "corrugated."



YES, please!	
Earn: \$170/ton (as of Q1 2022) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cardboard boxes, flattened Brown "craft" paper and brown paper bags (it's not cardboard, but it's the same basic material) 	 
Special notes about pizza boxes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove greasy inserts and liners If some of the cardboard is clean and some greasy, recycle the clean part and toss the greasy part (or put it in the Mr Fox composting bin) 	 
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
Mixed paper, magazines and single-ply cardboard have their own bin – that's up next. 	 

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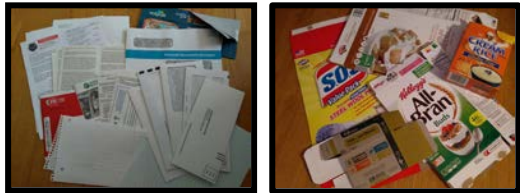



One Bin at a Time – Mixed Paper

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member


The mixed paper bin can be a little bit tricky, because it includes single-ply cardboard (cereal and cracker boxes, postcards, business cards and so on), but not gift-wrapping paper and tissue paper. And wet pack cartons are a definite no-no.

Dealing with mixed paper gets easier if you can reduce the amount that comes into your life in the first place. Start by reducing junk mail. Register on the **National Do Not Mail List** site - https://www.directmail.com/mail_preference/.

After reducing what you can, here's what to put in the mixed paper bin to be recycled.

YES, please!	
Earn: \$80/ton (as of Q1 2022) Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Office paper • Envelopes (plastic windows are okay) • Cardboard tubes, cereal boxes and the like • Magazines; books (remove book covers) • Paper egg containers (though these can be reused by those who keep chickens) • Paperboard take-out containers (clean) 	
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<p>Newsprint; this has its own bin, which allows us to get paid when we recycle it.</p> <p>Brown paper, which goes in with the corrugated cardboard.</p>	
<p>Water-proof and water-resistant cardboard are trash:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ice cream cartons, milk cartons • Coffee-to-go cups • Juice boxes • Wet pack/wet strength cartons that can go in the fridge or freezer 	
<p>Gift-wrapping paper and tissue paper are trash.</p> <p>Consider other gift-wrapping options, to reduce the amount of paper you have to throw out during special events throughout the year.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – Glass

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

At its most basic, glass is melted sand. We can make it, but so can nature – obsidian is volcanic glass and “frozen lightning” (fulgurites) can be the result when lightning hits a sandy beach. Pretty cool!

Like metal, recycling glass is as simple as melting it down and making something else. And this recycling can go on indefinitely with no loss of quality. Glass can also be ground down into Processed Glass Aggregate, which you can learn about here (with our own Steve Bullek) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hdKnNrKPxuM&feature=youtu.be>.

It costs us a bit to recycle glass, but it’s cheaper to recycle it than to toss it into a landfill, so recycling glass is a cost-reducer. Here’s the scoop on recycling glass in Lee.

YES, please!	
<p>Cost: \$40/ton (as of Q1 2022)</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bottles • Jars • Pyrex • Window panes (no frames) • Ceramics • Porcelain <p>The new chute allows for small items to pass safely to the bin. For larger items, ask an attendant.</p>	 
NOT HERE (but maybe in another bin)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CFL light bulbs – there’s a table up by the office with lots of buckets on it. One of those buckets is for CFLs. • Fluorescent tube light bulbs – there’s a barrel near the exit for these. • Plastic caps (trash) • Metal caps (small bucket by the aluminum and steel cans) <p>The following are trash:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incandescent light bulbs • Mirrors • Car headlights and windshields 	

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One Bin at a Time – Little Bins

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

We have now explored all of the big bins inside the Transfer Station – but wait! There's more!

We've already mentioned some of the little bins and barrels that are for things like tin foil, pie plates and metal lids. (These are near the steel and aluminum bins.)



There are also trash barrels along the wall for non-recyclables, and these other little bins and barrels that are inside the Transfer Station building.

YES, please!	
<p>The tables by the office have spots for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cell phones • Compact Fluorescent Lightbulbs (CFLs, the squiggly bulbs) • Rechargeable batteries • Eyeglasses • Clean egg containers (folks who keep chickens reuse them) • Razor blades for shaving and the packaging (Gillette cardboard box) 	
<p>These barrels by the exit are for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shredded paper (though you can mix this into a home compost pile, too) • Plastic foam “packing peanuts” • Fluorescent tube light bulbs 	
<p>And just outside the building is the Mr Fox composting tote.</p> <p>Ask an attendant for compostable bags to collect your food waste in.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – Out Back

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Think we're done now? Nope. There's more outside the Transfer Station building. Here's what you'll see as you leave the building and drive around back.

YES, please!	
<p>On the left, a pallet for containers of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used oil (motor or vegetable) Antifreeze <p>No gas or contaminated oil</p> <p>Place your container on the pallet; do not dump it into the pallet.</p>	
<p>On the right behind the building:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Used shoes, fabric and clothing that's no longer wearable Used books Concrete, brick, stone and other stone-like materials (no asbestos; no fee to drop stuff here) 	
<p>Around the corner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cold ashes on the right Wood pallets on the left (drop or take) Scrap metal (no fee) Construction debris, appliances and other bulky items (ask an attendant about fees or see https://www.leenh.org/transfer-station/pages/bulky-waste-fees) 	
<p>And the pièce de résistance... the Swap Shop.</p> <p>Drop off items that are in good condition and maybe pick up some new-to-you finds.</p>	

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One Bin at a Time – What's Left?

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

Okay, that's the Transfer Station. I'm recycling, composting and Swap Shopping everything I can, and I've gone from tossing one 13 gallon "landfill" bag every week to one bag every other week – a 50% reduction! Not bad. Now what?

Let's play "What's in Your Trash Can?" Here are some questions I've asked myself each time I was ready to reduce my non-recyclable trash some more.

Is there a less-wasteful or re-useable option?

My biggest trash bag filler was facial tissue. I opted to use TP instead (toss it into the toilet and it goes out the next time someone flushes). Maybe someday I'll switch to cloth handkerchiefs. Maybe I'll even make my own from worn-out flannel sheets (bonus waste reduction!).

Is there an option that has less non-recyclable packaging?

Produce is an example. I try to focus on items I can buy loose so I can use my re-useable produce bags. When I need to use a plastic produce bag, I wash and reuse it.

Is it something I can make or grow myself?

This takes a bit more investment of time. So far, I've developed a pretty good homemade hummus recipe and made a habit of picking blueberries from the bushes in our woods. I also follow a few "Zero Waste" groups on Facebook, where folks are happy to share their DIY tips.

Is this item a need or a want?

We started this series with the old adage, "waste not, want not." In this saying, the word "want" is not used in the sense of "I want pizza tonight," but more in the sense of, "I'll want for nothing" or "the freedom from want." It's used more in the sense of "need." Waste not, want not. If I don't waste what I have, I'll have all I need. But what is a need vs a want?

My own working definition of a "need" is "something required to maintain life, health or safety." Anything that's not a need is a want. It can be trickier than it sounds. Nutritious food as a whole is a need, but any specific food by itself is not. I need to eat, but I don't NEED to eat store-bought baked goods, for example. When a mere want is contributing a lot to my trash (like those baked goods do), I have a heart-to-heart with myself, which leads me to this last question...


How do I feel about reducing – or even eliminating – that item?

Habits are hard to change, but when I decide I'm ready, I take the baby steps needed to change to something better.

For example, as I reduced my non-recyclable plastic packaging, I found I was eating less meat (which often comes in non-recyclable plastic packaging). I'm also eating less ice cream and other treats. I doubt I'll ever be a vegetarian or completely give up treats, but reducing these items (among others) has me down to one 13 gallon bag ... wait for it ... every eight weeks!

There's more work to do, but I remind myself that this is a journey and am patient with myself.

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One Bin at a Time – The Paradox

Talking trash with Jen Messeder, LSC member

“No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible.”
Stanisław Jerzy Lec (often misattributed to Voltaire)

If only one snowflake decides not to participate in the avalanche, the avalanche – and its resultant destruction – still happens. That one snowflake might be able to sleep well at night, but...

Now, let's say that that one snowflake is able to convince several others not to participate in the avalanche. Probably still not enough. But if each of those convinces others, who convince others... now, we're talking.

If enough snowflakes refuse to participate in the avalanche, there is no avalanche.

The Paradox is this – our individual efforts to reduce humanity's solid waste are, at the same time, both completely worthless and absolutely vital.



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