Stakeholder Interviews

John Childress, Sales Manager of Virginia

The University of Richmond sales representative at County Waste, John Childress, offered some insight into County Waste’s processing, supply chain, and differentiation factors from other waste and recycling providers. Currently, County Waste does not operate a landfill, though they are analyzing a potential future location for one.\(^1\) In the present moment, however, County Waste is incentivized towards recycling as much as they can to earn revenue, rather than paying to dispose of items in a landfill.

County Waste is the largest commercial recycler in Richmond area, servicing residential homeowners associations, individuals, companies, and institutions like UR, VCU, and Liberty. While they do serve 250,000 residential subscription clients in the Virginia and Pennsylvania area, the bulk of their recycling business comes through commercial clients. In Central Virginia, the Waste Management Authority governs a few counties in the area and negotiates collectively on their behalf, such that the homeowners associations (HOAs) in the region must use County Waste for recycling. County Waste’s Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), where recyclable material is transferred after pickup, are located in Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, Richmond, West Point and in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania. These facilities process nearly 500 tons of recyclable material daily.

Through its agreement with UR, County Waste employees pick up waste and single-stream recycling from campus on a weekly or biweekly basis—depending on the location of the bin—and brings all items to their Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) in Midlothian, Virginia. Though there may be contamination among the recycled materials collected on campus, Childress says, County Waste does not evaluate the recycling on campus to determine whether to bring it to the MRF or add it to the landfill bin. This policy differs from UR’s former waste and recycling provider, which had stricter

\(^1\) County Waste’s proposed landfill will join seven other landfills under construction in the U.S., and upon completion, would be the largest landfill on the East Coast.
restrictions about which recycling it would even remove from campus. Both Dr. Andrejewski and Scott Lincoln conveyed appreciation for County Waste’s willingness to work with UR on improving recycling efficiency by continuing to remove all recyclables from campus, including plastics.

According to a pamphlet distributed at the MRF, County Waste accepts the following recyclable materials: “paper and cardboard products (including soft & hardback books, magazines, and junk mail), glass bottles and jars, plastic bottles and tubs #1-7, along with aluminum and ferrous metal containers including aerosol cans.” County Waste adheres to a single-stream recycling collection system to provide ease for consumers as well as for their collection team. When asked about the feasibility of implementing multi-stream (i.e. differentiated) recycling, Childress said that switching over would greatly increase their collection effort. “Instead of having one truck to pick up everything,” he describes, “I’d have to have four or five trucks. I’d have to have a cardboard truck, a tin truck, a glass truck, a plastic truck, etc.” Additionally, there’s the potential for customers who are accustomed to single-stream recycling refusing to adopt the new system, and therefore County Waste receiving less recyclable material.

The global plastics recycling crisis has impacted County Waste’s operations and has forced them to seek domestic buyers for their baled plastics goods, mostly along the East Coast. “So much of the [supply chain pipeline] allows manufacturers to place a premium on what they want,” Childress commented. Despite County Waste’s ability to find buyers for their recycled plastic, the company has had to reduce the percentage of recycled items they send to vendors. Before 2018, County Waste diverted roughly 8-10% of its collected recyclable material to landfill, as the majority of what it collected could be passed along in the pipeline. However, now that China has issued its refusal to accept foreign waste, Childress states, that percentage has grown to about 18-20% of collected material, since recyclables purchasers are less willing to accept materials that are tougher to repackage into new consumer goods. County Waste is also encountering

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2 Plastic bags, while recyclable in other localities, are not recyclable at County Waste’s MRF, as they clog the machines and require processing to stop for workers to remove them.
difficulty finding a market for glass, so they have begun to repurpose it for us on their own grounds, so at least it is reused instead of sent to the landfill.