

“If towns like Laramie or Fort Collins can recycle their glass, why can’t Cheyenne?” asks a reader. “We pay for recycling—and now our glass is added to the landfill at Ault, Colorado.” I emailed the question to Dennis Pino, Cheyenne’s director of solid-waste management, saying some Cheyennites now take their recyclables to friends in Fort Collins.

I also discussed the glass question with a number of people. My son recalled that, while he and his brother were in college in a California town, someone paid them ten dollars an hour to help sort the glass bottles he collected. “The man made good money doing that.” Members of my Fort Collins writing group observed bitterly that “It’s typical of Wyoming” to unload its problems on Colorado. Then Mr. Pino emailed back:

“We have lost our market for glass, so at this time we have suspended glass recycling until we can find a market for glass. I am working with Coors and it is looking good. We have a lot of details to work out but we should be able to start accepting glass in the next few months. The City is accepting one through seven plastics in our single stream curbside program. We also accept recycle material at the Transfer Station. The blue bin program was pulled because of lack of materials at the sites. The single stream program has been very successful. We’re increasing volumes every month by 10 to 15 tons. We are at 325 tons per month. Edith if you need information please call me at the office.”

The “one through seven plastics” may be in place elsewhere but it’s not here, I thought, and responded via another email. “If, as you say, the city accepts ‘one through seven’ through the curbside program, then you need to update the legend on the containers, which states ‘one and two’ and warns against disposing tubs--this means margarine, yogurt, cottage cheese, sour cream, etc, containers. Those all go into the landfill, alas, and some of my readers mightily complain.”

Eventually I telephoned Mr. Pino, who was quick to note that charging for recycling produces superior results. “In Denver, recycling costs are included in homeowners’ taxes. The result? Few people bother to sort recyclables into appropriate bins. The recycling rate there is only about thirty percent.”

“Why Coors, Dennis?” I asked. “The Busch plant is closer to home.”

“Coors and Busch work closely together,” he said, adding that Wyoming was the first state to require recycling. “I thought it was California,” he said. “But no.”

I recalled visiting in California when everything went into the trash. “It gets sorted out at the station,” homeowners told me. In the not-too-distant past, garbage was processed that way: a conveyor belt moved the smelly stuff past latex-gloved workers who picked out items, always in fear of getting jabbed by hypodermic needles.

Contamination is a big problem with glass recycling, he said. “Unrinsed containers can contaminate up to twenty percent of the glass and render it useless.” I myself had noted “recycled” jars of spaghetti sauce that still held some of its content.

“The same is true of plastic containers,” Mr. Pino said, adding a plea to rinse out those gallon containers of milk. “You can use the gray water on your house plants. The milk residue contains vitamins and nutrients that are good for plants.”

I recalled a cartful of unrinsed gallon-size milk containers at Albertson’s coffee station. To my inquiry, an employee responded that the station lacks the means to rinse them.

“Batteries should never be tossed into the trash. They’ll leach harmful chemicals into the landfill,” Mr. Pino added. I mentioned that retailers like Lowes have containers for batteries where clients can recycle anything from power-tool batteries to the tiny hearing-aid ones. Then I asked about fluorescent bulbs and CFLs.

“These, too, should be treated as hazardous waste,” Mr. Pino said.

But it’s a hardship to collect spent bulbs at home and then drive them out to the transfer station. To this Mr. Pino replied he was working with various retailers—he mentioned Home Depot—to set up drums that will “eat” the bulb glass while catching the harmful mercury dust in filters.

Finally I asked about the recent WTE article regarding a possible waste fuel power plant. Wouldn’t such a plant solve Cheyenne’s dependence on the Colorado landfill?

“About a year and a half ago,” he said, “we had a meeting with folks from American Renewable Energy Associates. But I haven’t seen a proposal or any type of paper work since.” He mentioned that “for several more years” he is bound by a contract with Waste Management, which would be costly to break. Another consideration is “the tipping fee” which, for such a plant, can be \$100 to \$150 per ton, although American Renewable has not quoted any fees. Cheyenne generates about 150 tons of solid waste per day. For the Ault landfill, the tipping fee amounts to \$48 per ton. Of course, there’s the considerable additional expense of a fleet of semis hauling the trash to Colorado every weekday.

Following the conversation with Mr. Pino I obtained phone numbers and placed calls to Claudia Teeters and Heather Foster, both of whom deal with public inquiries at American Renewable Energy Associates. I wanted to learn how the company can offer this interesting possibility by 2012 when it has yet to negotiate with Cheyenne authorities. As of this writing, the calls have not been returned.