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Task Order No. 53

**Montgomery County Division of Solid Waste Services
Assessment of Customer Satisfaction on Services
Provided by the Collections Section**

Final Report – September, 2008

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past, the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Solid Waste Services (DSWS) has conducted a variety of polls and surveys to gauge public awareness of its various programs, as well as customer satisfaction. DSWS conducted this phone survey to update and document both usage and customer satisfaction in order to assure an integrated approach to their closely related set of services.

The primary goals of the survey were to assess the participation, knowledge, and awareness of residents to curbside collection services within two targeted areas where the County provides either recycling and trash collection services or just recycling collection services and to determine their satisfaction with these services. In addition, collected data will help the County refine, adjust, or expand its program of solid waste management services in these sectors to more effectively achieve their stated trash collection and recycling missions, and to promote waste reduction and increase recycling participation County-wide.

Montgomery County Executive Regulation 15-04AM establishes the entire County as a recycling service area. All single-family residences in the County, with the exception of those in certain incorporated municipalities, receive weekly curbside collection of mixed paper, glass bottles and jars, aluminum and bi-metal cans, plastics including narrow-neck bottles, yard trim, Christmas trees, and scrap metal items (household appliances, metal bed frames, etc.). Residents are required to recycle those materials; furthermore, these recyclable materials are banned from disposal in trash. Residential trash collection services might be County-provided or arranged by residents with County-licensed contractors.

Currently, specific trash collection and recycling services to single-family homes are provided by two organizational units of DSWS, the Collections Section and the Waste Reduction & Recycling Section, respectively.

For collection purposes, the County is divided into two solid waste collection subdistricts A and B (referred to as Area A and Area B in this report) based on Montgomery County Code (see Appendix 1). Currently, DSWS provides curbside collection services to 209,540 homes in both Areas A and B.

Within Area A, the County provides refuse and recycling collection services once a week to 90,270 residences, through contracts with private collectors. The County also provides scrap metal and bulk trash collections to these residents, but those services must be scheduled. These residences include single family homes and multi-family properties that have six units or less.

Within Area B, there are approximately 119,270 households served by the County for recycling collection. Refuse collection services in this Area are provided by private collectors contracting directly with homeowners or Home Owners Associations (HOAs).

Following the same process as in Area A, the County provides curbside recycling collection services, which includes pick-up of scrap metal items and yard trim, such as grass, leaves, brush, and tree limbs. No bulk trash collection is provided by the County to single-family residents in Area B; however depending on their individual contracts with private collectors, residents may still receive this service from their refuse collector.

Over a four-week period in July 2008, TRI conducted a telephone survey of detached single-family dwellings and townhome residents from 700 homes (350 located in Area A and 350 in Area B) in Montgomery County. This final Summary Report includes the results of our survey efforts. In the Introduction section, we provide a brief overview about why DSWS wanted to assess the satisfaction of single-family residents. Next, under Survey Objectives, TRI details the specific goals for this survey task in Areas A and B. The third section, Survey Approach, discusses our methodology and overall approach to completing this Task Order. In Observations, we list key observations related to specific subject areas covered in the survey, including recycling practices, satisfaction levels for all services, and informational needs. The Recommendations section includes suggestions for future DSWS activities based on the observed data. In the Data Summary section, TRI tabulates and summarizes data collected from the 700 surveyed residents, and documents trends in responses along with any inferences to collected demographic data.

The majority of respondents were over the age of 44 and, of the total surveyed, 40 percent were college graduates and over one-third had advanced degrees. The largest percentage of respondents reported they either lived with one person or three additional people. Over three-quarters of the respondents had lived in Montgomery County for 10 years or more.

In general, Montgomery County residents from the surveyed group in both Areas A and B were found to be very aware about recycling activities with the exception of scrap metal; and respondents in Area A were slightly less informed about the more specific requirements and regulations for curbside trash collection and the materials acceptable for bulk trash pick up.

Mixed paper, aluminum cans and foil products, glass bottles and jars, and plastic narrow-neck bottles were found to be recycled by the majority of respondents (94%), while bi-metal (steel/tins cans) were recycled less frequently (83%). Shredded paper was recycled by over two-thirds of all respondents, while paperback and hardback books were recycled at curbside by less than half of those surveyed. It is interesting to note that almost three quarters of those surveyed recycled unwanted/junk mail with less than half of these respondents reporting they shred this material before placing it into their recycle bins, yet forty percent of the respondents who placed unwanted mail into the trash as opposed to recycling it reported they also shred it first. Residents reported several reasons as to why they do not recycle their unwanted mail including security issues, time constraints and habits; and recycling awareness issues; however, none of these can be identified as the primary issue as the related data are not statistically significant.

The majority of respondents were aware that Montgomery County provides curbside recycling collection of yard trim, including grass clippings, leaves, tree limbs, and brush for residents.

The majority of respondents (61%) reported they were not aware that the County provides scrap metal recycling collection at curbside for residents. Consequently, less than half of those surveyed were aware of the specific collection requirements/restrictions for items left for scrap metal collection. Almost half of the total respondents who said they were aware that the County provided curbside scrap metal collection service also reported they have used this service. Two-thirds of these respondents knew how to arrange for a pick up of scrap metal items. Of those who had not used this service, only one-third knew how to arrange for pick up of scrap metal items.

Survey data showed that confusion exists among single-family residents in Area A as to the difference of what it means to recycle scrap metal items as opposed to treating it as bulk trash at curbside. For example, the majority (over 87%) of the 242 respondents who knew about bulk trash services either reported they thought bikes and washing machines/dryers were collected as part of the curbside bulk trash collection (48% to 55%) or were not sure (30% to 44%) if they were accepted or not.

Almost half of the total 700 respondents felt that having the County provide a larger container for recycling bottles and cans would be very helpful. Two-thirds of the total 700 respondents (68%) felt that having the County provide a smaller container for mixed paper would not be very helpful. About one-third of the total 700 respondents reported they thought eliminating the sorting of recyclable materials would be very helpful; however, an equal number reported it would not be helpful.

Within Area A, over one-third of the respondents (35%) reported they knew that trash may not be left at the curbside in plastics bags, yet almost two-thirds of the total 350 respondents were found to be aware that trash must be placed in trash cans with tight-fitting lids.

Nearly three-quarters of the total 350 respondents in Area A were aware that trash cans could not be left at curbside all week; the majority of respondents said there was no weight limit or they did not know. Almost two-thirds of respondents in this Area were found to be aware that furniture and other large items are not picked up weekly at curbside without a special pick up.

Over 60 percent of respondents in Area A reported they were very satisfied with the curbside refuse collection program and the cleanliness of the area after collection. Those who reported that they were not satisfied with either curbside collection or bulk trash collection provided no suggestions for improvement. Over half of the respondents were very satisfied with how their trash cans were returned to the curbside. Less than 40 percent of the respondents reported they were very satisfied with the process for notification of why some items were not collected; however, more than 25 percent reported they were not sure of their satisfaction with this activity.

Respondents from single-family homes expressed preferences for obtaining recycling or trash collection information through direct mail (43%), e-mail (25%) as compared to other outreach methods such as ads placed on the radio, cable stations, or in newspapers.

Data obtained from this survey are statistically reliable at an index of ± 3.8 percent and are deemed representative of the recycling and trash collection issues of the targeted single-family residents in Montgomery County. These results will assist the County in planning future single-family residential initiatives and educational programs within their budgetary constraints.

Based on our research and findings, TRI has provided recommendations for both recycling and trash collection activities based on the observed data.

Recycling Activities

- Expand the frequency of outreach by utilizing routine direct mailings on at least a bi-yearly basis to inform this target audience about changes in recycling requirements.
- Expand educational efforts to encourage composting and grasscycling practices by single-family residents to eventually eliminate the need for collection and reduce the quantity of yard trim wastes including leaves, grass, and brush collected at curbside.
- Create a flyer to provide more information about handling and disposal of hazardous materials such as pesticides, motor oil, and fluorescent bulbs.
- Continue or expand educational efforts about scrap metal recycling in this sector using direct mail.
- Continue to educate single-family residents about the need to recycle unwanted/junk mail in this sector.

Trash Collection Activities

- Expand the frequency of outreach by utilizing routine direct mailings to inform this target audience about changes in trash collection requirements; or creating an informational magnet or door hanger on trash collection services for mass distribution.
- Launch an intensive educational campaign to educate single-family residents regarding trash collection and bulk trash requirements. Develop and distribute educational outreach resources on a routine basis such as a flyer sent by direct mail that clearly define what materials are collected as part of the curbside pick up as part of bulk trash collection as well as more information about what constitutes hazardous materials and the proper methods for handling and disposal of these items such as pesticides, motor oil, and fluorescent bulbs.
- Continue to work with contractors in Area A to maintain or improve customer satisfaction levels related to courtesy of collectors, cleanliness of the area after collection, notification of why items were not accepted, and replacement of trash cans at the curbside.

- Clarify the differences for bulk trash collection and special scrap metal recycling pickups for residents in Area A so they understand how the materials are treated even though special collections are arranged for both of these by contacting the DSWS Customer Service line.

By continuing to provide educational outreach concerning curbside recycling and trash collection services to single-family residents, DSWS will accomplish its mission to provide the best solid waste services while meeting the needs and improving the satisfaction levels of the County residents. In this way, more materials will be removed from the waste stream for recycling, disposal capacity will be conserved, and there will be a positive impact on the overall recycling rate in Montgomery County.