Packaging: Problems and Possibilities for Recycling

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A brief look back:

- Lots of types of packaging are new to recycling.
- We’ve always recycled beverage containers (including glass) and cardboard.
- PET and HDPE bottles have a long history.
- But before 2009, in Seattle and much of the metropolitan area, most coated papers and 3-7 plastics weren’t part of our curbside (“blue bin”) programs.
We added food service packaging in 2010.

- Compostable
  - As a way to capture food waste.
  - This is the preferred alternative.

- Or recyclable
  - Which, unfortunately, presents contamination problems:
    - Plastic in the compost
    - Yucky food at the MRF
  - Will be limited to take-out.
Seattle 2012 recycling rates*. 

- Single family
  - 71.1%
- Multi family
  - 32.2%
- Commercial
  - 61.4%
- Combined
  - 55.7%

*Includes composting.
Challenges.

What is it?

- With a great variety of materials out there, consumers are unsure what’s recyclable or compostable and what to do with it.

- Cities’ public education budgets are severely limited.

- Better labeling is essential, and that depends on the packaging industry.
Challenges.

Recycling markets.

- Cross contamination
  - Glass
  - Coated papers
  - Less valuable plastics

- Shipping costs

- The "Green Fence"
Challenges.
New materials.

- With the best of intentions – “zero waste,” “sustainability,” new, lighter packaging materials are coming on the market.
- But sometimes they can’t be recycled in our existing systems.
- Some flexible packaging is an example – complex laminates, etc.
- Is WTE really “sustainable?”
Moving forward.

What’s needed.

- **Packaging industry collaboration with the solid waste (materials reuse and recycling) industry and state and local governments.**
  - Already started – PacNEXT, SPC, others

- **Several key areas:**
  - Consumer education
  - Design for reuse or recycling
  - Product stewardship
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