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News Local news

More Than a Ton of Support for St. John Plastic Recycling

May 9, 2022

A forklift hauling 700 pounds of recyclable plastic makes its way toward a converted shipping container in Susannaberg, St. John. It's the latest contribution toward curbing the amount of discarded waste that might wind up in the ocean.



Island Green's Anthony Novelli receives a donation of recyclables from St. John resident Louise Putnam. (Photo by Judi Shimel)

Since it kicked off its new plastic recycling program in January, the nonprofit group, Island Green Living, has collected and processed 3,300 pounds of material. Operations Manager Anthony Novelli welcomed visitors to the Susannaberg donation center on a Saturday morning, including a Michigan couple whose family has been turning trash into treasure since 1905.

If the kind of recycling taking place on St. John was being done in the states and on a larger scale, it would require industrial equipment, Novelli said. But for now, the equipment housed in the shipping container gets the job done.

"Our goal is to save ocean-bound plastic; any kind of plastic that's on this island is ocean-bound plastic because we're within 20 miles of the ocean," Novelli said.

Volunteers help, he said, collecting drop-off donations at the Susannaberg yard and making pickups from St. John businesses who pay to support the recycling. Volunteers and two full-time workers also help sort, clean, and prepare plastics for processing and packing.



To show how it's done, Novelli dumps a trash bag of material onto a sorting table and picks through the keeps and the throwaways. All single-use plastic cannot be accepted. He holds up a drinking straw and a plastic fork as examples of things that are shuttled into a garbage can. Clear plastic sheets are used to wrap items packed in cases. They get thrown out too.

But beverage caps, that's a different story. He gently tips one barrel brimming with colorful caps. Those can be recycled, he said, but have to be handled separately. To the side of the sorter sits a row of bins, each marked with a number in a triangle.

Its coding is used to classify different types of plastics. Drinking water bottles and take-out salad bowls, yogurt containers, detergent bottles, and juice jugs each have a symbol embossed on them. Each finds a home in one of the numbered bins.

Once they're processed, they'll end up as flattened sheets of recyclables, stacked up and packed up between cardboard sheets, bound with plastic strips, and set to one side of the yard. When the number of processed parcels builds up, a 40-foot container is brought in to load up and haul them away.

Looking over the results of regular processing, Novelli says each pack of processed No. 1 plastic — the lightest kind — weighs between 80-100 pounds.

The equipment was donated by Padnos, a recycling and scrap management company based in Lansing, Michigan. Bill Padnos, son of company founder Seymour Padnos, and wife Margy stopped by over the weekend to check on the program's progress.

"People have been recycling since the beginning of time. Someone might have, say, a cracked pot, and they can't use it like that, so they give it away. And it can become something else, or it can be used in another way," Padnos said. "One of the advantages of our business is that we recycle plastics, metal, and wood. So if recycling here ever expands, we can accept different types of materials."

Island Green's efforts to divert recyclables from St. John's waste stream began several years ago with aluminum beverage cans. Novelli said that effort has been ongoing in spite of operational disruptions brought on by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

A total of 1.3 million beverage cans have made their way to a better place through the nonprofit's recycling efforts so far, he said.



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