# The HIGHLANDS Wonka Time! Page 17

February 2, 2024 NYPA Newspaper of the Year Support our nonprofit: highlandscurrent.org/join

### 'Rabbi Brent' to Take On New Role

Beacon synagogue begins search for successor

**By Jeff Simms** 

B rent Spodek knows that marriage isn't easy.

After his wife, Alison, was diagnosed with leukemia in 2013, Spodek says he learned valuable lessons about communicating with his partner. When the couple would argue, Spodek said he found himself employing the "Beck defense."

"I would basically say, 'I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?' "he said, recalling the refrain from Beck's 1994 hit. In other words, Spodek would apologize without actually taking responsibility for how his actions had impacted his wife.

"I was putting my partner in the position of having to reassure me that I wasn't so bad," he said.

In time, Spodek learned that the pattern was a common one that couples experience. He began taking responsibility for his woeis-me feelings and concentrated on taking care of his relationship with his wife.

Spodek, the rabbi at the Beacon Hebrew Alliance (BHA) for the past 13 years, announced last month that he will step back from the position as of July to become a full-time premarital counselor. He will transi-



position this summer to focus on counseling.

Photo by Valerie Shively

tion into the role of rabbi emeritus at BHA.

Spodek began working with couples in 2018, after the "emotionally intelligent communication" he'd learned while his wife recovered began showing up in his rabbinical work.

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# Death Penalty Still on Table in Beacon Carjacking Case

Couple, charged in killing ex-husband, loses motion

By Leonard Sparks

federal judge refused to dismiss an indictment in which a former Beacon couple faces the death penalty in the alleged carjacking and killing of the woman's ex-husband, who disappeared after returning their daughters to a home on West Church Street.

Judge Philip Halpern, of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York, on Jan. 19 rejected a motion by attorneys for Jamie and Nicholas Orsini to dismiss the two charges they face — carjacking resulting in death and conspiracy to commit a carjacking — in the disappearance of Steven Kraft.

The Marlboro resident has not been seen

since April 28, 2020, after he returned the two daughters he shared with Jamie Orsini to her home following a custody visit.

The next day, Kraft failed to show up for his job at a deli in Marlboro, and on May 4, 2020, investigators found his 1999 Camry abandoned in the City of Newburgh.

One of the earliest pieces of evidence was surveillance footage showing Kraft's car crossing the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge on April 28. Nicholas Orsini is accused of being the driver, and prosecutors say they have camera footage of him at a gas station on Route 9W in Newburgh, where he allegedly used a burner phone to call a taxi to take him back to Beacon.

Halpern said in his eight-page decision that the Orsinis' contention that "the government has not alleged (and cannot prove) the required nexus between the intent to kill or harm Kraft and the taking

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**PART I** 

# TALKING TRASH

As housekeeping goes, trash is easy — you place it in a plastic bag and inside a plastic carton and a truck arrives and takes it away. But where those trucks end up is vital to the health of the Highlands, and to the planet. The thousands of tons of garbage produced by local residents each year that can't be recycled (or can be, but isn't) must be buried or burned, which contributes to global warming and air pollution. In this series, we will examine county and state plans to deal with all that trash and what municipalities and individuals are doing to reduce waste.

### By Brian PJ Cronin

here does your garbage go when you throw it away? In the Highlands, you might be breathing it.

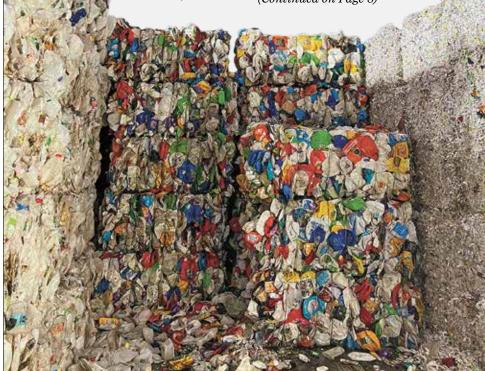
Every year, about 45 percent of Dutchess County's garbage — around 150,000 tons — goes up in smoke at an incinerator located on the Hudson River in southern Poughkeepsie. Putnam County's trash travels south to a larger incinerator in Westchester located across Lent's Cove from the former

Indian Point nuclear power plant.
Across the state, New York operates 10 incinerators, more than any other state — Florida also had 10 until an incinerator near Miami burned down.

The preferred industry term for these facilities is "waste-to-energy," or WTE, because the plants produce power. The Pough-keepsie incinerator makes enough electricity annually for about 10,000 homes, and the Peekskill incinerator for more than 30,000. But they also emit greenhouse gases, the primary driver of global warming; in 2022, the Peekskill plant emitted 286,000 metric tons and the smaller Poughkeepsie plant, 40,000 tons. Both plants also release toxins such as lead, mercury, cadmium, hydrochloric acid and nitrogen oxides at rates many times higher than coalburning plants per megawatt hour.

The 10.63 pounds, or 4,822 grams, of mercury emitted annually by the Peekskill incinerator might not seem like much, but, according to one study, it would only take one gram added annually to a 20-acre lake to eventually make the fish there unsafe to eat.

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### TALKING TRASH

(from Page 1)

"Those are just the pollutants that we know about," said Courtney Williams, a cancer researcher who is a member of the Westchester Alliance for Sustainable Solutions. "They're only required to test for a few."

Williams, who lives in Peekskill, can see the incinerator from her porch. "I could see the smoke stacks, but I didn't really know what it was," she said. "Then I found out that the smoke was pretty much all of Westchester's garbage."

Finding out more about the smoke is a challenge. I've been covering environmental issues for The Current for nearly a decade and this series was by far the most difficult one to research because many people in charge of trash don't want to talk about it. Requests for public plans were denied. Site visits took months to schedule, if they were allowed at all. Interview requests were ignored.

It also was not always easy to find out what I assumed was basic information. While Dutchess keeps detailed records of where its trash comes from and where it goes, a representative of Putnam County told me it doesn't have access to that kind of data.

The Peekskill and Poughkeepsie incinerators, which have been operating for more than 30 years, get more expensive and less efficient over time. For every 100 pounds of trash burned, 30 pounds of toxic ash is produced and must be carted to the landfills that the incinerators are supposed to replace. The closest landfill still operating is 230 miles away and it's almost full.

There is little political will or popular support for new landfills, although some environmental groups are beginning to reconsider them. Further, the state's ambitious climate goals, which include creating zero emissions by 2040 when producing electricity, would seem incompatible with incinerators.

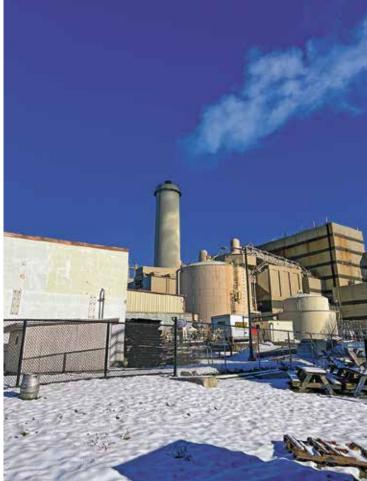
### What's the plan?

Each county in New York, like the state itself, is required by law to release an updated solid-waste management plan every 10 years. Both the state and Dutchess County released updated plans in 2023; Putnam's updated plan is overdue by four years. (The county said it's working on it.)

Like its climate goals, the state's plan is ambitious. It proclaims that by 2050, landfilling and combustion will be reduced by 85 percent, "waste" will be a concept from the past and an efficient, "circular economy" will be realized in which nearly everything produced is repaired, reused or recycled.

"The linear model of 'take, make, toss' is unsustainable," said Dave Vitale, who directs the Division of Materials Management for the state Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). He points out that recycling rates in the state and country have stagnated. "Instead of looking at something as a byproduct, or waste, we need to look at it as a valued resource. In a circular economy, we're divesting from systems of disposal."

The state plan lays out 175 actions across every sector of the waste system. For example, the Legislature could pass laws that require the parts in products to be easier to repair









as exchanging the batteries in a TV remote. One issue with the county and state plans is that they are not always coordinated. The phrase circular economy does not appear in the 239-page Dutchess plan, and "repair" appears only three times — once to note that many environmental organizations host grassroots "repair cafes" and twice to note

or replace. Imagine if replacing an iPhone

battery that no longer charges were as easy

It also notes that there is only one large-scale composting facility in Dutchess (McEnroe Organic Farm in Millerton, a private company) but that the county hopes to complete a study before 2033 that would examine the type, size and location for another.

that the county might do one of its own.

Looking beyond the Poughkeepsie incinerator, the county sees another incinerator. "Waste-to-energy technology has served the county well," its plan says. Unlike the state plan, it concludes that more materials will have to be burned and calls for a new burn site to handle the growing waste stream. It expects this effort will require "years of planning and investment of millions of dollars, as it did in the early 1980s when Dutchess County decided landfilling was not the best option."

The Dutchess plan frequently refers to its incinerator as a facility that "processes waste in an environmentally sound manner." But many researchers state that, even if facilities are operating within pollution standards set by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, nothing is without risk.

"Whenever you have combustion of anything near people, you're going to have a health impact," said Sintana Vergara, an engineering professor at Cal Poly Humboldt who studies waste management. The impacts get trickier and riskier when burning trash because the pollutants are constantly changing, depending on what is burned, and often



**Courtney Williams** 

Photo by Mike Matteo/Peekskill Herald

include particulate matter, as well as dioxins produced by burning plastic.

There's also the matter of where the incinerators are located. According to the most recent federal census, 60 percent of Poughkeepsie's residents are minorities. In Peekskill, it's 66 percent. "In the U.S., we have a pretty long history of siting incinerators in low-income communities and in communities of color," said Vergara. "And we also have a long history of resistance to those facilities."

When New York's most recent waste plan was being drafted, a discussion took place about whether to demand that incinerators be phased out because they are incompatible with state climate goals. A DEC representative said the agency plans to examine each incinerator when its permits come up for renewal.

In Peekskill, the review is happening now; in Poughkeepsie, it's next year. Kerry Russell, Dutchess County's deputy commissioner for solid-waste management, doesn't foresee any problems. "We've had several meetings to discuss what this next phase of renewal will be, and we will work with them throughout all of next year, ensuring that we do get the renewal," she said.

That doesn't satisfy Yvette Valdés Smith, a Democrat whose district in the county Legislature includes Ward 4 in Beacon. "I hate to say it, but I keep seeing these examples of poor planning," she said. "And to me, poor planning and no planning are the same thing."

Valdés Smith said her first impression of the latest Dutchess waste plan is that "it seemed like a copy-and-paste job" from the previous version. "Not a lot has changed," she said. "But from an environmental standpoint, a lot has changed." On Sept. 11, Valdés Smith and the five other Democrats in the Legislature voted against the plan (one Democrat was absent), but the 17 Republicans in the majority united to pass it.

Valdés Smith said she tried to get \$30,000 inserted into the budget to hire a consultant to figure out how the county could burn less trash, but that also was voted down along party lines. Westchester County took a different approach, allocating \$90,000 in its 2024 budget for a zero-waste consultant.

### Less to burn

Lou Vetrone, a deputy commissioner at Westchester's Department of Environmental Facilities, said the county has been able to reduce the amount of waste being sent to the Peekskill incinerator by 28 percent since 2005, although he doesn't think that's close to enough.

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The Poughkeepsie incinerator

Photo by B. Cronii

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He is hoping the consultant can help. "We think we have a good handle on where things need to go, but it's always helpful to have another set of eyes," he said. "There may be other things going on in different parts of the country or even different parts of the world that we could incorporate here."

The \$90,000 appropriation was a victory for the Westchester Alliance for Sustainable Solutions, which would like to see the incinerator shut down. But Courtney Williams noted that, realistically, that will only happen if there is not enough trash to burn. "Stop making all this garbage in the first place and then we won't need to worry about diverting it from the waste stream," she said.

Because incineration is one of the most expensive ways of dealing with waste, even with the energy it produces, Williams said the cost of a consultant should pay for itself in savings. "If we get more composting facilities, more material recovery facilities in place, those things will always be there," she said. "We spend money to set these things up, but we'll save all that money we're not spending to burn trash."

The consultant also ties into Williams' belief that activists can only do so much when dealing with the interaction of science and government. "It is not your personal responsibility to solve every single aspect of an unjust waste-management system," she said at a recent forum at Vassar College. "You didn't create this problem. The solid waste-management process system in this

county didn't get built by volunteers and community groups, it got built by the machinations of the county government."

### What can be done

The Peekskill incinerator burns 2,500 tons of trash each day. Is it possible to reduce that to zero?

Both the state's waste and climate plans say that the infrastructure is already in place. Waste processing and using fossil fuels to produce electricity each generate about 13 percent of the state's greenhouse gases, but researchers estimate that the power grid in New York has the capacity to provide as much as 90 percent of electricity through renewable energy technology that already exists.

Likewise, the reason why the state waste plan sets 85 percent as a target for reducing the amount of trash sent to landfills and incinerators is because there are already ways that we could redirect that 85 percent. Construction materials can be repurposed, bottles can be recycled, food can be composted, electronics can be reused, clothes can be thrifted, that lamp in the garage which hasn't worked in years can be repaired.

"When you look at it from the perspective that we already have systems in place to divert 80 percent of the things that are thrown away, that makes it a much more manageable problem," said Williams. "We have a lot of what we need, we just need to scale it up."

**NEXT WEEK:** Compost happens

### **NOTICE**

The Philipstown Conservation Board will hold their regular monthly meeting on **Tuesday**, **February 13th, 2024** at **7:30 p.m.** at the Philipstown Town Hall, 238 Main St., Cold Spring, NY.

If you are unable to join in person but would like to watch, the meeting will be livestreaming on youtube.com, search for Philipstown Conservation Board February 2024.

### **NOTICE**

The Philipstown Zoning Board of Appeals will hold their regular monthly meeting on Monday, February 12th, 2024 at 7:30 p.m. at the Philipstown Town Hall, 238 Main St., Cold Spring, NY.

If you are unable to join in person but would like to watch, the meeting will be livestreaming on youtube.com, search for Philipstown Zoning Board February 2024.

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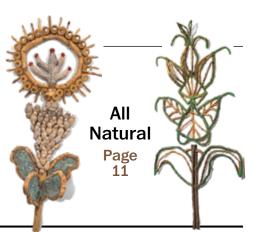
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PART II

# TALKING TRASH

As housekeeping goes, trash is easy — you place it in a plastic bag and inside a plastic carton and a truck arrives and takes it away. But where those trucks end up is vital to the health of the Highlands, and to the planet. The hundreds of thousands of tons of garbage produced by residents each year that can't be recycled (or can be, but isn't) must be buried or burned, which contributes to global warming and air pollution. In the second part of our series, we examine composting as a method to reduce waste and what it would take for widespread implementation.

### By Brian PJ Cronin

ecently, when my son was grumpily scraping what was left on his dinner plate into the compost bucket, my Buddhist wife told him not to think of it as throwing food away. She explained that the slice of tomato was returning to the cycle of death and rebirth by way of the bucket, so that it could come back to us next year as another tomato.

She meant it as a joke, but when I recounted the story to Matthew Hamm of McEnroe Organic Farm, he nodded his head. "There's no statement truer than that," he said.

The compost operation at McEnroe is located in Millerton on a hilltop with panoramic views. When Hamm makes a sweeping motion with his hands while explaining how Massachusetts and Connecticut tackle their trash problems,

it's not an idle gesture: Standing amid towering piles of what looks like garbage, you can see mountaintops in Massachusetts and rolling fields in Connecticut.

"It's a dirty job," Hamm says. "But people are starting to see the benefits."

Lean in close to one of the enormous black piles around the farm and you'll catch an earthy, slightly sour scent: Food scraps and decomposing plants are being slowly transformed into something greater than the sum of their parts. One of the first things that Hamm teaches new hires is that if the piles of rotting food smell like rotting food, something has gone wrong. "If you get the microbiomes right, it's not rotting," he explains.

Hamm did not dream of becoming a composter. He studied criminal justice in college and wanted to be a state (Continued on Page 8)



## Philipstown Residents Defend Legislator Montgomery

Putnam County chair threatens to end meeting

By Leonard Sparks

he chair of the Putnam County Legislature repeatedly threatened on Tuesday (Feb. 6) to end its monthly meeting as a train of Philipstown residents criticized his decision to leave Nancy Montgomery off the body's standing committees.

Under the Legislature's rules, residents are restricted to commenting on agenda items. Chair Paul Jonke grew frustrated when defenders of Montgomery, who represents Philipstown and part of Putnam Valley as the Legislature's sole Democrat, said they wanted to comment on a resolution appointing Legislator Greg Ellner of Carmel to the Capital Projects Committee.

After Janice Hogan, the chair of Philipstown Democrats, named that resolution as the subject of her comments before speaking about the treatment of Montgomery, Jonke threatened to end the meeting.

"That's not an agenda item," said Jonke, who represents Southeast. "If this is going (Continued on Page 7)



CYO ACTION — The fourth-grade girls' basketball team sponsored by Our Lady of Loretto of Cold Spring in the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) league hosted Church of the Resurrection from Rye on Feb. 3 at Phillipstown Rec but fell short, 17-3. (Here, Winter Steltz looks for a teammate.) The boys' sixth-grade team played the day before, defeating St. Patrick's of Yorktown Heights, 31-24. For more photos, see highlandscurrent.org.

Photo by Ross Corsair

## Beacon Residents Ask Council To Support Gaza Cease-Fire

Urge members to adopt resolution about conflict

By Jeff Simms

he City Hall courtroom was filled Monday night (Feb. 5) with residents asking the Beacon City Council to adopt a resolution calling for a cease-fire in Gaza. Although Newburgh's City Council approved a cease-fire resolution on Jan. 22, the Beacon

council generally does not wade into national or international politics. On Monday, several people said it should change that approach.

Anything less than a cease-fire resolution "will be read by your community as an implicit support of continued violence at home and abroad," said Veekas Ashoka, who was among the protesters who interrupted the mayor and council's swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 6.

As Rep. Pat Ryan, whose U.S. House district

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### TALKING TRASH

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trooper. But one summer he worked at the McEnroe Farm Market and a manager told him they needed help with the compost. Hamm thought a front-end loader would be more interesting than a cash register.

He had never given much thought to food waste but soon realized the scale of the problem and the role that large-scale composting could play in solving a host of entangled issues. "It's food security, it's food safety, it's environmental sustainability," he says. "You're investing in the future."

That was 18 years ago. Hamm abandoned his policing plans and instead became the compost bagger at McEnroe Organic Soils & Compost, working his way up to manager.

McEnroe is the only large-scale compost operation in Dutchess County, producing 8,000 cubic yards annually. Hamm says he would welcome competition. "If 10 more compost facilities showed up, we'd still have enough for our share," he says.

### Moving the needle

There is no silver bullet for fixing the climate crisis, but composting comes close.

When food scraps are sent to a landfill, they end up in what's known as an anaerobic, or oxygen-free, environment. As microbes break down the waste, they produce methane, a powerful greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming.

If that same food waste is composted, it doesn't produce methane.

Composting still produces another greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, but it's far less potent. When Beacon recently updated its greenhouse gas inventory, it measured methane emissions from the capped landfill by the Denning's Point transfer station for the first time. Although it's been closed for decades, the landfill remains by far the city's largest source of greenhouse gases, producing more than a third of Beacon's emissions.

The benefits of finished compost are familiar to gardeners and farmers who use it as a nutrient-rich fertilizer that increases







Photos by B. Cronir

water retention and minimizes erosion. Those same qualities make it invaluable in restoration projects, such as rebuilding stream banks and revitalizing grasslands.

"As we apply compost to grasslands, we get more plant growth, but we also get more carbon sticking around in the soil," explains Sintana Vergara, an engineering professor at Cal Poly Humboldt who studies waste management. "And that's good news from a climate-change perspective, because we're pulling carbon out of the atmosphere, where we don't want it, and into the soil, where we do."

As detailed in the first part of this series (see highlandscurrent.org/trash), most of the solid waste produced in Putnam and Dutchess counties is sent to incinerators.

But the high water content in food scraps reduces their efficiency while also releasing dioxin, a highly toxic pollutant that takes a long time to break down.

"There's agreement across the industry that, if we're going to move the needle significantly in terms of waste reduction, there are only a few areas that are going to have a serious impact," says Lou Vetrone, a deputy commissioner at the Westchester County Department of Environmental Facilities. "One of them is food waste."

Vetrone said that 25 municipalities in Westchester have drop-off food scrap recycling and two have curbside programs. County trucks pick up the scraps and bring them to a large-scale compost facility. The county also runs a compost garden to show school groups and municipalities who aren't already on board how it works.

Westchester's solid-waste management plan stands in stark contrast to those in the Highlands. Putnam's plan expired in 2020 and there is no timeline for an update. In Dutchess, the City of Beacon in 2022 sent a letter to the county urging it to fund a study on whether composting could be expanded, including the creation of additional large-scale processing facilities. In its solid-waste management plan, released last year, the county says it hopes to complete such a study by 2033 and, according to Kerry Russell, deputy commissioner for solid-waste management, build on the success of local pilot programs in Beacon, Rhinebeck and Red Hook.

The lack of meaningful support at the county level has left the volunteers who created and operate drop-off food scrap programs feeling that their programs are succeeding against the odds. "We're hoping to get some funding at some point," says Karen Ertl of Garrison, who helped establish a food-scrap recycling program in Philipstown. "But we're not holding our breath."

#### A question of scale

In 2022, New York State enacted the Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Act, which requires any institution that generates an average of at least 2 tons of food waste each week to donate any edibles and send the rest to be recycled if it is within 25 miles of a composting facility. The state Department of Environmental Conservation says that, as a result of the law, food-scrap recycling jumped more than 500 percent from 2021 to 2022.

66 If 10 more compost facilities showed up, we'd still have enough for our share.

### ~ Matthew Hamm

Composting advocates hoped that the law would encourage the creation of more local composting facilities, but so far that hasn't happened. Yvette Valdés Smith, a Democrat whose district in the county Legislature includes Ward 4 in Beacon, has been pushing for a Dutchess compost plan, only to find that many of her fellow legislators don't understand how composting works. She says some told her that they don't want to spend money on something that people can do in their backyards.

That's true, but backyard composting has its limits. Not everyone has a backyard. And not everyone has the time or physical ability to maintain a compost pile, which breaks down food scraps at a much slower rate than larger, hotter piles and can't be relied on to decompose meat or

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Matthew Hamm of McEnroe Organic Farm stands in front of a compost pile which he estimated was "a little shy of 1,000 [cubic] yards."

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dairy. Larger facilities can accept just about anything. "I always tell people, 'If you eat it, we can take it,' says Ertl in Philipstown.

Dutchess legislators did include \$200,000 in the 2024 budget for a grant program to assist municipalities in purchasing and installing "in-vessel aerobic composters," enclosed devices that break down food scraps faster than an outdoor pile. But the grants can't exceed 50 percent of the price, and Sergei Krasikov, the chair of Beacon's Conservation Advisory Committee, says he's not sure the program is as appealing to municipalities as the county might think.

"I doubt any municipality will — or should — jump at an opportunity to procure an in-vessel composting facility before doing a study and developing a plan," he says. "How are food scraps getting picked up? Who pays for and provides containers for the households? Will there be a fee for residents? What happens to tons and tons of compost as it gets produced? What is the scalability of the system to increase operational capacity as participation grows?

"It seems to make more sense to offer municipalities grants to conduct studies and draw up operational plans before offering to help them buy composters."

Beacon's drop-off composting program has collected more than 110,000 pounds of food scraps since it began as a pilot program in 2022. Faye Leone, the city's Climate Smart coordinator, says that although the program hasn't been made official, it's hard to imagine that Beacon residents would let it lapse.

"We can't go back," she says. "The willingness and the commitment are there, but we have only the bare bones of what a program could look like. We're not even making a dent in our total emissions."

Krasikov says the program is great "in terms of changing behavior. But to reduce Beacon's emissions by 20 to 25 percent with this, we need curbside composting."

Without more large-scale processing facilities, Krasikov doesn't see how that could happen. "If each municipality has to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to build a composting facility, it's just devastatingly expensive," he says. "This is where economies of scale could kick in. If the county had a facility that could service a few towns, the price drops for everyone."

Without county support, Beacon is left to figure out how to expand its program while also minimizing emissions. That led to a recent change: Instead of being shipped to Westchester, Beacon's compost is now picked up by the Community Compost Co. of Ulster County. The firm already offers curbside composting to businesses and households in Beacon for a monthly fee, so picking up Beacon's municipal output on the same weekly trip eliminates the greenhouse gas emissions produced by the truck that came from Westchester.

"We're already there," said Molly Lindsay of Community Compost. "Might as well fill up the truck."

Community Compost is smaller than McEnroe Farms, as Lindsay explains while walking among the piles on a cold December day. A light snow made it easy to see



A drop-off site for Beacon's municipal composting program

which piles were ready: The snow was sticking to them. A pile in the process of breaking down has to maintain an internal temperature of between 131 and 160 degrees — hot enough to kill pathogens but not hot enough to kill microbes. On the piles that were still cooking, the snow turned to steam as soon as it landed.

Lindsay says Community Compost would like to see more small sites than centralized processing. "Spread that compost around and then the finished product can go back into the communities where it's produced," she says. Customers in its curbside program get two bags of compost delivered per year.

As hot as its piles get, the company doesn't  $\,$ 

accept "compostable" bio-plastics such as plates and cups because they don't break down fast enough. Vergara, the professor at Cal Poly Humboldt, has noticed the same thing at every composting facility she's visited.

"Perhaps under lab conditions, these materials might degrade," she says. "But under the timescales that we see in commercial composting facilities, these items just don't break down. At the facilities that I have visited, they screen out bioplastics and throw them away."

Lindsay has been working for Community Compost for 10 years. In that time, mostly from speaking to people at farmers' markets, she has noticed a shift in the way people think about food waste. "There wasn't a lot of awareness when I started" of food waste and its role in global warming, she says. "But people are figuring out that compost is a way to resolve this."

Customers have told her that, since composting, they've become more aware of food waste and started spending less on groceries. "When they have to separate it, they're seeing how much food they're throwing out," she says. "They're saying, 'OK, I never used those three cucumbers, I don't need to buy that many.' And then they're changing their shopping habits."

New York's solid-waste management plan says the state won't be able to tackle its massive waste problem unless it moves to a "circular economy" in which nearly all materials are reused in some form. Walking amongst the steaming piles in Ulster County, I couldn't help but think that there was no better visual representation of this sort of economy than compost. Somewhere, in one of these piles, the tomato my son threw out a few weeks ago was in the process of breaking down to return to us in the spring as a bag of compost for our garden, in which we will grow more tomatoes.

"Instead of dumping your food scraps in one bin, you're putting them in a different bin," says Lindsay. "It's a lot easier than people think."

#### NEXT WEEK:

Plastics and the limits of recycling





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There weren't many options for Donald Van Voorhees, who is 74 and disabled, when the lease on his Beacon apartment was not renewed. Photo by Una Hoppe

### A Close Call

Beacon man finds housing after eviction, but barely

**By Jeff Simms** 

en Warner and Donald Van Voorhees had crossed paths many times on Warner's morning walk with his dog down Main Street in Beacon, but it wasn't until last summer that they had their first serious conversation.

In July, Van Voorhees shared the eviction papers he'd recently been served. Six months later, the connection between the two men kept Van Voorhees from being homeless.

After a local law that made it more difficult to evict renters was struck down by a City Court judge in November, Van Voorhees was given until Jan. 31 to leave the studio apartment where he had lived for 23 years. Vinit Jobanputra, who purchased 455-457 Main St. in 2022 for \$1.5 million, said in court filings that the building was in desperate need of repairs, with considerable water leakage and structural issues.

He informed Van Voorhees in February 2023 that his lease would not be renewed when it expired on May 31. After renovations. Jobanputra said he hoped to obtain market-based rent for the building's six apartments. "From what I understand, it would not be possible" for Van Voorhees to pay that, he told the court.

That left Van Voorhees, who is 74, disabled and without a cellphone or internet access,

(Continued on Page 7)

## **Beacon Council:** No Cease-Fire Resolution

Some residents wanted statement on Gaza conflict

By Jeff Simms

**▼** he Beacon City Council will not draft a resolution calling for a cease-fire in Gaza. The decision, reached Tuesday (Feb. 13) during an emotional workshop meeting, angered many of the people who had filled every seat in the City Hall courtroom.

The council was inundated a week ago with comments from residents seeking a resolution similar to one adopted by the Newburgh City Council last month. On Tuesday, Paloma Wake, an at-large representative who has said she is in favor of a resolution, made the case to her colleagues.

Wake said that "upward of \$200,000" in taxpayer funds from Beacon "have been going to fund this conflict" – a reference to a calculation by the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights of the local contribution

(Continued on Page 3)

## **Cold Spring** Launches **Parking Changes**

Resident permits begin March 1, Main Street meters follow April 1

By Michael Turton

fter years in the making, significant changes aimed at improving an often-stressful parking picture in Cold Spring are about to become a reality.

Permits that limit parking on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and holidays to residents on 11 streets in the core of the village take effect on March 1. Metered parking on Main Street that will be in effect on the same days begins on April 1.

At the Feb. 7 meeting of the Cold Spring Village Board, Trustee Eliza Starbuck said the plan addresses "egregious and longstanding" issues, including a shortage of resident parking, weekend traffic congestion on Main (Continued on Page 21)

PART III

# TALKING TRASH

**By Brian PJ Cronin** 

As housekeeping goes, trash is easy — you place it in a plastic bag and inside a plastic carton and a truck arrives and takes it away. But where those trucks end up is vital to the health of the Highlands, and to the planet. The hundreds of thousands of tons of garbage produced by residents each year that can't be recycled (or can be, but isn't) must be buried or burned, which contributes to global warming and air pollution. In the final part of our series (the first two installments are posted at highlandscurrent.org), we examine what it would take to break through the "plastic ceiling" that's limiting the effectiveness of recycling.

ecycling is considered one of the few national environmental U success stories and has become part of the fabric of our everyday lives.

Also: You're doing it wrong. When in doubt, throw it out," not

into the green bin, says Audie Holt of Republic Services, a fourth-generation trash processor, as we donned hard hats and safety vests and headed into the deafening, cavernous Republic Services recycling center in Beacon.

Holt's great-grandfather came to the U.S. from Italy in 1898 and made a living by collecting discarded copper in his horse-drawn wagon. Every generation in her family since has been in the trash business. She resisted at first, getting an accounting degree and working on Wall Street, until the pace and excess became too much. "It was clables from the Hudson Valley each month; the material is sorted, packed and sent to the processors that will break it down. But its staff also spends an excessive amount of time pulling items from the conveyor belt that should not be in the stream.

Some of those materials can have serious consequences. The day I visited, the plant had just reopened after being closed for a few days to install technology that puts out fires caused by exploding lithium batteries. Because people keep throwing stuff away even when the plant shuts down, the staff was working its way through a backlog.

Having never thrown a lithium battery into my recycling bin, I felt pretty confident talking with Holt and Dave Kahn, who has managed the plant since it opened 10 years ago. I know they



### TALKING TRASH

(from Page 1)

that rinsing my tomato paste cans and peanut butter jars does make a difference.

However, as Holt and Kahn riffed on the common items that can't be recycled but still end up on the conveyor, my smugness vanished.

Those blue-and-white mailers from Amazon with the big recycling logo on them? Not recyclable. (Oops.)

Shredded paper in a clear plastic bag? Not recyclable. Holt explained that if one of those bags makes it past the pickers, it will explode when it hits the machinery and rain shredded paper. (Oops.)

The paper coffee cups with the plastic lids from chain coffee shops? Because of the coating on the inside of the cups, they're not recyclable. They go in the trash, although the lids go into the recycling. (I thought the lids were too small to be recycled and had been throwing them away and putting the cups in the recycling. Double oops.)

But there were depths of depravity to which even my recycling habits  $\operatorname{did}$  not  $\operatorname{sink}$ .

There were the diapers. Soiled diapers.

"And not just baby ones," says Kahn as he points out an enormous pile of wet plastic next to one of the conveyor belts.

Holt says that she once spoke to someone who believed the diapers were recyclable because the box had the universal recycle triangle on it (indicating the box can be recycled, not its contents). She also casually mentioned that Republic knows when deer-hunting season has started because carcasses start showing up.

Thankfully, those stories are outliers. Kahn says that most of what comes into the plant is recycled. He can even find a buyer for the "higher-numbered" plastic containers, although the plastic in those has been recycled several times already and isn't worth as much. Plastic containers with a 1 or a 2 on them, such as milk jugs, are worth the most.

The efforts at Republic are a key part of New York State's recently updated solid-waste management plan, which aspires to create a "circular economy" within 25 years that produces little waste. But recycling rates across the state have stagnated. Dutchess' recycling rate is at 35 percent, in line with the state rate. Putnam's is 11 percent.

### Who pays?

Recycling has become a harder equation in recent years for municipalities. It used to be that the cost of recycling was lower per ton than what they paid for trash pickup. But that began to shift around 2018, when China stopped buying and recycling the world's discarded plastic and other materials, such as cardboard, and prices dropped. Now it costs as much or more to separate and process recyclables than just to burn or bury everything.

In September, the Beacon City Council added \$61,000 to the recycling budget because of those rising costs. Is there a point at which, from a financial perspective, recycling no longer makes sense?

"The market fluctuates, but I haven't seen the prices go so high that we'd consider suspending recycling," says Chris White, the



city administrator. "People generally do a good job of sorting their recyclables, so we would be hesitant to upset the system. Once you stop or suspend, it would be tough to restart."

With plastics, there is also a question of whether separating them makes any difference. Less than 10 percent of plastic gets recycled. This week, the Center for Climate Integrity released a report, "The Fraud of Plastic Recycling," that accuses fossil-fuel companies of pushing plastics despite knowing that 90 percent will have one life. It called on states to take legal action over this "decades-long campaign to deceive the public about plastic recycling."

At least one attorney general has heeded the call: In November, Letitia James sued PepsiCo for clogging the waterways of Buffalo with single-use plastics.

### Who's responsible?

We are fighting a losing battle with stuff. A chart in New York State's solid-waste management plan explains that the average American consumes twice as much as they did 50 years ago. That statistic becomes even more disheartening in the fine print, which indicates the "current" numbers are from 2000 and so don't reflect 24 years of "fast" (disposable) fashion, online commerce and single-use plastics.

There is an optimistic way of interpreting that data, however.

Our consumption patterns are learned behaviors that can be changed, notes Sintana Vergara, an engineering professor at Cal Poly Humboldt who studies waste management. "Our grandparents didn't produce a lot of waste; when something broke, they fixed it."

There are signs that younger generations are embracing that traditional approach, such as the resurgence of thrifting clothes as a trendy alternative and stores such as Cold Spring's Understory Market and Beacon's REfill REstore that sell goods in (Continued on Page 10)

 $The \,Republic \,Services \,plant \,in \,Beacon \,processes \,5,000 \,tons \,of \,recyclable \,trash \,each \,month.$ 

Photo by B. Cronii



If plastics aren't recycled locally, and they don't end up in a body of water such as the Hudson River or the Atlantic Ocean, they make their way to a landfill or an incinerator in Poughkeepsie or Peekskill.

As we explained in Part I of this series, despite the pollution these incinerators create, Dutchess' recently updated solid-waste management plan says that the county is leaning toward replacing its aging structure with a new one. However, there have been signs the county is reconsidering. In December, just days before his term as county executive ended, William F.X. O'Neil told the *Mid Hudson News* he planned to stay on until March 31 to advise incoming County Executive Sue Serino on waste management, including, perhaps, "an exit strategy" for the incinerator. (The county declined to make O'Neil available for an interview.)

As for landfills, New York has not created a new one since 2006 and has no plans for more. Ulster County conducted studies for several years to determine if and where it could start one, although any suggestion has been met with fierce public opposition from the residents of any town that gets mentioned as a potential site. That prompted the Ulster County Legislature to attempt to pass a resolution to discourage the county from conducting any more studies, but the vote failed along party lines, with the Democrats voting no. Three months later, the county announced another study.

The closest landfill to the Highlands still in operation, and the largest in the state, is Seneca Meadows, 240 miles away in the Finger Lakes. It's scheduled to close next year, although its owners are fighting to keep it open, arguing that there's nowhere else for the trash.

Even if it were to remain open for a while longer, burying trash is not a long-term solution, says state Sen. Pete Harckham, who chairs the Committee on Environmental Conservation. "We need to figure out a better way to deal with our waste."

# RECYCLING GUIDE

The NYS Recyclopedia allows you to search for items to find out if they can be recycled, although local guidelines may vary. See recyclerightny.org/statewide-recyclopedia.

Here is a quick guide.



The Conservation Advisory Committee sponsors a free residential compost drop-off program. Drop-off bins are located at the Recreation Department (23 W. Center St.), Memorial Park and the Churchill Street parking lot near Hudson Valley Brewery.

As of Jan. 1, the program no longer accepts "compostable plastics," such as bin liners, bags, utensils or containers unless they are made of bamboo. Pizza boxes are accepted if shredded. Packing tape and labels are not compostable.

To purchase supplies, see beaconny.myrec.com/info/products. The city offers a 2-gallon kitchen bin for \$10, a 6-gallon transport bin for \$20 and an 80-gallon Earth Machine compost bin for \$45. Order online and pick up at the Rec Department. For more information, email compost@beaconny.gov.

Community Compost Co. offers residential pick-up in Beacon starting at \$26 per month or \$281 per year. The firm provides a 5-gallon bucket that is swapped out weekly or biweekly. Customers also receive free compost twice a year. See communitycompostco.com.

To register for residential composting, visit Philipstown Town Hall, 238 Main St., in Cold Spring, weekdays between 9 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. to purchase a startup kit for \$20 (checks only). It includes a pail, a transportation bin and 25 bags. Drop-offs can be made each Saturday between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. at the Philipstown Recycling Center on Lane Gate Road. For information, email foodscraprecycle@philipstown.com.

Putnam County sells Earth Machine compost bins for \$70. See bit.ly/PC-recycle.



The Philipstown Recycling Center on Lane Gate Road, which is open on Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., accepts rechargeable batteries, cables, cameras, computers and peripherals, copiers, fluorescent lamps, gaming devices, cellphones, tablets, monitors, phone systems, printers, routers, scanners, stereos, external hard drives, televisions and wiring and cabling.

It also accepts bundled paper and cardboard, refrigerators, freezers, air conditioners, dehumidifiers, mini-split condenser units and central cooling units. Permits must be obtained at Town Hall to drop white goods such as washing machines and scrap metals. See philipstown.com/government/ recycling-center.

In Beacon, residents can drop up to 250 pounds of material at the Transfer Station at 90 Dennings Ave. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from late May to late September. It accepts appliances, car batteries, cardboard, construction debris, furniture, household goods, paper, scrap metal, tires, wood and yard waste. See bit.ly/beacon-recycling. Many items require a fee. It does not accept e-waste.

To sell or give away items, see facebook.com/marketplace or join Facebook groups such as Philipstown Free Stuff (bit.ly/philipstown-freecycle) and Free Stuff Beacon (bit.ly/beacon-free-stuff).



# WHAT GOES IN THE BIN





### Glass

Juice, wine, ketchup, food, canning, all colors



### Metal

Cans, aluminum, trays



### **Plastic**

Dairy, juice, water, shampoo, dishwashing and laundry detergent, bleach, soda, labeled No. 1 or No. 2



### **Paper**

Newspapers, books, junk mail (including envelopes with plastic windows), glossy flyers, magazines, copy paper, shipping boxes, packaging boxes (e.g., cereal and shoe boxes)

### **TOP 5 RECYCLING REJECTS**

According to Recycle Right NY, here are the top five mistakes consumers make when sorting their trash.



### **Plastic Pouches** –

Many food and beverage pouches, such as those used for yogurt, juice, applesauce and baby food, cannot be recycled because they are too soiled by food and difficult to sort because they are flexible. Instant soup and instant rice bags are also not recyclable because they are made from mixed layers of plastic and aluminum.



Receipts - Most receipts are made of thermal paper that cannot be recycled. Throw them out or ask for digital receipts.



**Batteries, Electronics, Cellphones** — Batteries, electronics and cellphones can be recycled but should not be put into bins because they can cause fires in trucks and at facilities.



### **Ceramics and Drinking**

**Glasses** — Items such as wine glasses, drinking cups, mirrors, light bulbs and ceramics (whether broken or whole) cannot be recycled.



Plastic Bags — Plastic bags can be recycled but do not belong in the bin because they are "tanglers" that can wrap around equipment at the processing facility. Other tanglers include clothing, ropes, yarn, light strands, zip ties, garden hoses, wires, chains, blinds, cords and metal hangers (which can go back to the dry cleaner).

### **More Rejects**

Paint brushes/rollers

Aerosol cans Animal medical cones Artificial turf Balloons Bike helmets Blister packs Brushes/combs Bubble wrap Candles Candy wrappers Caps (bottle) Caps (screw) CDs/DVDs Cigarette packs Coffee pods/filters/bags Confetti Corks Cosmetics Cotton swabs Cravons Credit/gift cards Cups (paper)

Diapers

Drver sheets/lint Envelopes (padded paper) Envelopes (plastic) Face masks Fiberboard Flowers (artificial) Food waste Frozen food bags/boxes Gas cans Glass (acrylic/plexiglass) Glass (broken) Glow sticks Holiday lights Ice-cream cartons Ice packs Kitty litter Lids (glass containers)

Light bulbs

Matches

Mirrors

Nut cans

Disinfecting wipes Paint cans Paper towels Party favors Pencils/pens/markers Phone cases **Photographs** Pillows/cushions Pizza boxes (greasy) Plastic (foam, labeled No. 6) Plastic (ABS, sometimes labeled "No. 7 Other") Plastic eggs Plastic plates Plastic salad bags Plastic toys Plastic wrap Pool noodles Popcorn bags Pots and planters Meat packaging Produce baskets Pyrex Razor blades Packing peanuts Rice bags (mesh)

Rubber bands Rubber gloves Shopping bags (reusable) Silica packets Silicone products Snack bags Sponges Sports equipment Stick deodorant Stickers Straw Straws Suitcases Takeout containers Tape dispensers Tissues or toilet paper Toothbrushes/tubes Trophies/medals VHS tapes Water filters Wax paper

Waxed cardboard

Windshield wipers

Yard waste

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Stacks of paper, shredded and bundled, wait at Republic Services to be shipped to mills.

Photo by R. Croi

### TALKING TRASH

(from Page 8)

bulk to customers who bring containers. But there needs to be systematic change.

"I could kill myself trying to not throw stuff away, but I would not accomplish as much as I accomplish with advocacy," says Courtney Williams, a cancer researcher who is a member of the Westchester Alliance for Sustainable Solutions. "It is not a personal moral failing to make garbage. Dedicating your time to changing the system is a much better use of that time than fretting and bending over backward to stop making garbage."

Last year, Williams was featured in an ABC News documentary, *Trashed*; the producers placed 46 tracking devices in plastic bags that were discarded in recycling bins around the country. Only a few bags ended up at recycling plants.

In Kingston, a bag dropped in a bin at Target ended up in a landfill. Another bag placed in a bin at Walmart there turned up weeks later in Indonesia, one of the few countries still taking U.S. plastic. A bag left in a recycling bin at Target in Newburgh was burned in the Peekskill incinerator that Williams can see from her porch. "There's no reason that recyclables should be getting burned," she says.

State Sen. Pete Harckham, whose district includes parts of Putnam and Westchester counties, notes that, by one estimate, only 14 percent of plastics in New York are being recycled. "It's not because people aren't separating it and putting it in the bins," he says. "It's because the plastics and the chemicals in them can't be recycled. We all have our roles to play, but we don't control the amount and types of packaging that our products come in."

Harckham is among the sponsors of a bill that would require packaging to be reusable or recyclable and not contain 15 chemicals, including polyvinyl chloride (PVC), PFAS, formaldehyde and mercury. Companies that use packaging that can't be recycled would be on the hook for the costs of disposal.

"Producers aren't going to change on their own," says Alexis Goldsmith of the advocacy group Beyond Plastics. "This is why we have emission standards for vehicles and energy-efficiency standards for appliances. We need environmental standards for packaging."

California has a law that says whatever is

produced must include recycled material, without any chemical bans, which is not as tough as what's being proposed for New York, Goldsmith says. Even when it contains recycled material, the packaging in California is "still going to the landfill or incinerator once it's done with. The goal is to keep recycling, keep those materials in circulation."

The New York proposal has been making the rounds for a few years, but Harckham says it's in a stronger position during this legislative session because, for the first time, the Senate and Assembly versions are identical. Another piece of legislation, the Bigger Better Bottle Bill, would expand the types of bottles that have deposits and increase the deposit from 5 to 10 cents.

"When I was growing up, if you went to the grocery store and you bought Coca-Cola, you saved those bottles and you took them back to the grocery store the next time you went," Harckham says. "Coca-Cola picked those bottles up and refilled them. So we've already had a circular economy. The goal is to start getting back to that, start using higher recycled content in packaging, and to use less packaging."

If New York joins California in regulating the content of packaging, it's likely to have a national impact. "It would certainly get the attention of packaging companies, so that they'd have one standard to comply with," says Harckham. Goldsmith says several other states are contemplating similar legislation but are watching to see if it can pass in New York.

Such laws could make it easier for counties to come aboard. When I asked Dave Vitale, who directs the Division of Materials Management for the state Department of Environmental Conservation, about the inconsistencies between the state's waste plan (build a circular economy through 175 concrete action steps) and the plans in Dutchess (keep using the incinerator) and Putnam (last updated in 2010), he noted the difficulties counties and municipalities face to enact sweeping changes, such as making producers change their manufacturing methods.

But if the state passes these laws, creating a "disposal disincentive surcharge," it means less trash at local incinerators and landfills. "That changes how the counties manage, it changes their funding and what they use their funding for," he says. "Our big moves will help them make big moves."