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Starbucks plans to turn its Chicago coffee cups into napkins

Posted by Melissa Allison

Starbucks is finding new ways to use the 3 billion paper cups its customers use each year, even in cities where recycling is not popular or mandated.

This fall, it will send cups used at its Chicago stores to Green Bay, where a Georgia Pacific paper mill will turn them into Starbucks napkins.

The effort is a major push by Starbucks to create a commercial market for its used cups, which include 1 billion plastic cups for cold drinks.



Over the past few weeks, it has put recycle and compost bins into 90 Seattle stores to comply with a new city ordinance.

By Thursday, every grocery store, restaurant and coffee shop in Seattle will be required to recycle and compost, and to provide recyclable or compostable to-go packaging for everything from ground beef to lattes.

The new ordinance will prevent 6,000 tons of food and service ware from piling onto garbage heaps. Starbucks' cups also are recycled or composted in San Francisco and Ontario, because of laws there.

In areas without such mandates, commercial demand determines which products are recycled.

"The biggest road block to recycling is the lack of demand" for old paper, said Jim Hanna, Starbucks' director of environmental impact (pictured). "We need to create demand for recyclers for our products."

The effort is similar to something Coca-Cola has done in South Carolina, where it invested \$60 million in a plant that makes soda pop bottles from old soda bottles and other recycled plastic.

Environmental activists at the As You Sow Foundation in San Francisco, which led a shareholder initiative earlier this year to push Starbucks to recycle more, is impressed with its latest efforts. The initiative received 11 percent of the vote, a healthy chunk considering that mutual funds and other institutions own three-quarters of Starbucks' stock.

"Their goal is not just to have recycling bins in stores by 2015, but to find markets so all those paper cups actually get recycled," said Conrad MacKerron, director of corporate social responsibility at the nonprofit.



Finding a market for paper cups is harder than for items like aluminum cans, he said.

"It seems formidable, because you have to go to scores of municipalities and make sure the stuff gets picked up and put into cardboard or some kind of reuse of fiber," MacKerron said.

Even in Seattle, where recycling and composting are readily available, some businesses have not rushed to do it.

Not all food businesses will be compliant with the ordinance on Thursday, said Dick Lilly, manager of waste prevention and product stewardship for Seattle Public Utilities.

"They'll all be part way on July 1, but they won't all be all the way," he said.

Starbucks will be all the way. It started installing recycle and compost bins in May and now has them in all 90 of its company-owned stores in Seattle. A few dozen stores inside grocery stores, bookstores and some other venues are the property and responsibility of those businesses.

Some Starbucks shops already had bins, often because someone who worked there pushed for them.

Christy McKay, a manager in Phinney Ridge, began offering recycling and composting for customers about three years ago.

At first, she thought the coffee cups were compostable, but during a visit to Cedar Grove Composting learned that the plastic lining inside the cups prevent that facility from composting them. (In San Francisco, the same cups can be composted.)

Now the cups go in the recycle bin and "customers ask why don't other stores do it," she said.

Lilly at Seattle Public Utilities said one reason restaurants and other food businesses have not offered composting and recycling, even though it's less expensive than regular waste pick-up, is the effort it takes to educate workers about which items go into which bins.

"There's resistance to change," he said. "In the restaurant business, there's a lot of turnover, so you have a lot of training, and the more systems you have, the harder it is."

Although recycling collectors now accept all plastics and coated paper, people still get confused when separating their trash.

The public also gets mixed messages, he said. For example, when Tully's Coffee used compostable coffee cups for a couple years, people thought that meant all coffee cups were compostable.