City of Greenbelt
PRESS RELEASE

301-474-8000 **FAX 301-441-8248** **www.greenbeltmd.gov**

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Contact: **City of Greenbelt Department of Public Works**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Suzy Q. finishes the last drop of her plastic soda bottle, flattens it out, puts the plastic cap back on, and gets up to throw it into the recycling bin. Suzy Q. tries to recycle as much as possible because she knows it is important for environmental sustainability. In Greenbelt and across the US, the total amount of recycling has increased over the past several decades. Luckily, Greenbelt uses a single stream process, which means that the materials do not need to be separated by cardboard, glass, or plastic.

Greenbelt's 1st Zero Waste Week from September 1-7, 2016 brings awareness to the importance of recycling and how it makes a significant impact on the problem of waste in our community. Diverting waste away from the landfill and recovering resources by recycling are prime goals of a zero waste approach. Prince George's County has recently decided to steer toward a zero waste approach and the Green Team's Zero Waste Circle celebrates this along with the community's successful history of recycling.

Despite small fluctuations, Greenbelt's diversion rate has been on a positive trend over the last decade. In fact, Greenbelt's average diversion rate of 54% over the past decade is greater than the national average of 34%, way to go Greenbelters! Take a look at our numbers: from 2003-2015, Greenbelt's overall trend in recycling has been positive, and tons of disposed landfill trash have been on a steady decrease for more than a decade. The commingled residential curbside recycling was highest from 2003-2007, and fluctuated at lower rates from 2008-2015. As the economy recovered in 2012, the total overall tons of recycling decreased while tons of landfill trash rose slightly. This trend demonstrates greater consciousness of resources during periods of

economic stagnation, and decreased resource recovery during economic growth. Why can't we do the right thing all the time?

Despite Greenbelt's impressive diversion rate, many citizens are unaware of what happens after their recycling gets taken out of the collection bins. Blue recycling bins are emptied out by the Department of Public Works and transported to Prince George's County Materials Recycling Facility (MRF). At MRF, the recycling is placed onto huge conveyer belts and is mechanically separated out. Paper will glide on top of the rollers while Suzy Q.'s plastic soda bottle—and other materials like glass or cardboard—will drop through. A huge magnet attracts tin cans from above the conveyer belt, making them cling to the magnetic surface while the other material gets sorted below. The MRF is open to the public, including schools, civic and church groups, scout troops and families for scheduled tours. To schedule a tour, please call the MRF at (301) 324-4760.

It is an impressive system, but it is easily broken by misinformed citizens. Plastic bags from the grocery store get caught up and stop the conveyer belt system from functioning properly. Recent legislation restricts plastic bags of any color, size or shape, and plastic film from being accepted in the Prince George's County Residential Curbside Single-Stream Recycling Program. Residents are encouraged to recycle clean and dry plastic bags at grocery stores or other retailers instead of placing it in your recycling bin or cart. To find drop-off plastic bag recycling locations follow the link: http://www.plasticfilmrecycling.org/s01/s01dropoff.html. Even better, remember to bring your reusable bags or totes as a zero waste alternative to plastic or paper bags when shopping.

In addition to plastic bags getting stuck, contaminated materials can also halt the recycling process. All too often, citizens do not realize that if their paper plate has food residue or if their soda bottle has some liquid left, those "recyclable" materials are re-directed to the landfill.

When the materials are not contaminated, each recyclable bottle, can, and piece of paper gets compressed into a cube after the conveyer belt separation process (see pictures below). From there, cubes are picked up from companies that will reuse material. Suzy Q.'s soda bottle could be turned into t-shirts, fleece jackets, carpeting, or even reusable water bottles. On that note, drinking from a reusable bottle is a great way to

save money and the Earth's natural resources, but recycling your disposable plastic bottles correctly leaves significant impact as well.

Recycling takes a matter of seconds, yet still there are tons of recyclable materials being thrown into the landfill every day. Remember to rinse all food and beverage containers and to recap lids on containers before throwing them in the recycling cart/bin. The EPA estimates that about 96% of food that could be composted ends up in landfills and incinerators. Leftover food scraps can be composted with yard waste using a backyard compost bin. Be on the lookout for an announcement to buy your discounted compost bin from Public Works soon! If every person rinsed and recycled their disposable bottles and food containers, then the world would be filled with fewer landfills and we would be one step closer to achieving zero waste. All it takes are a few seconds of your time.

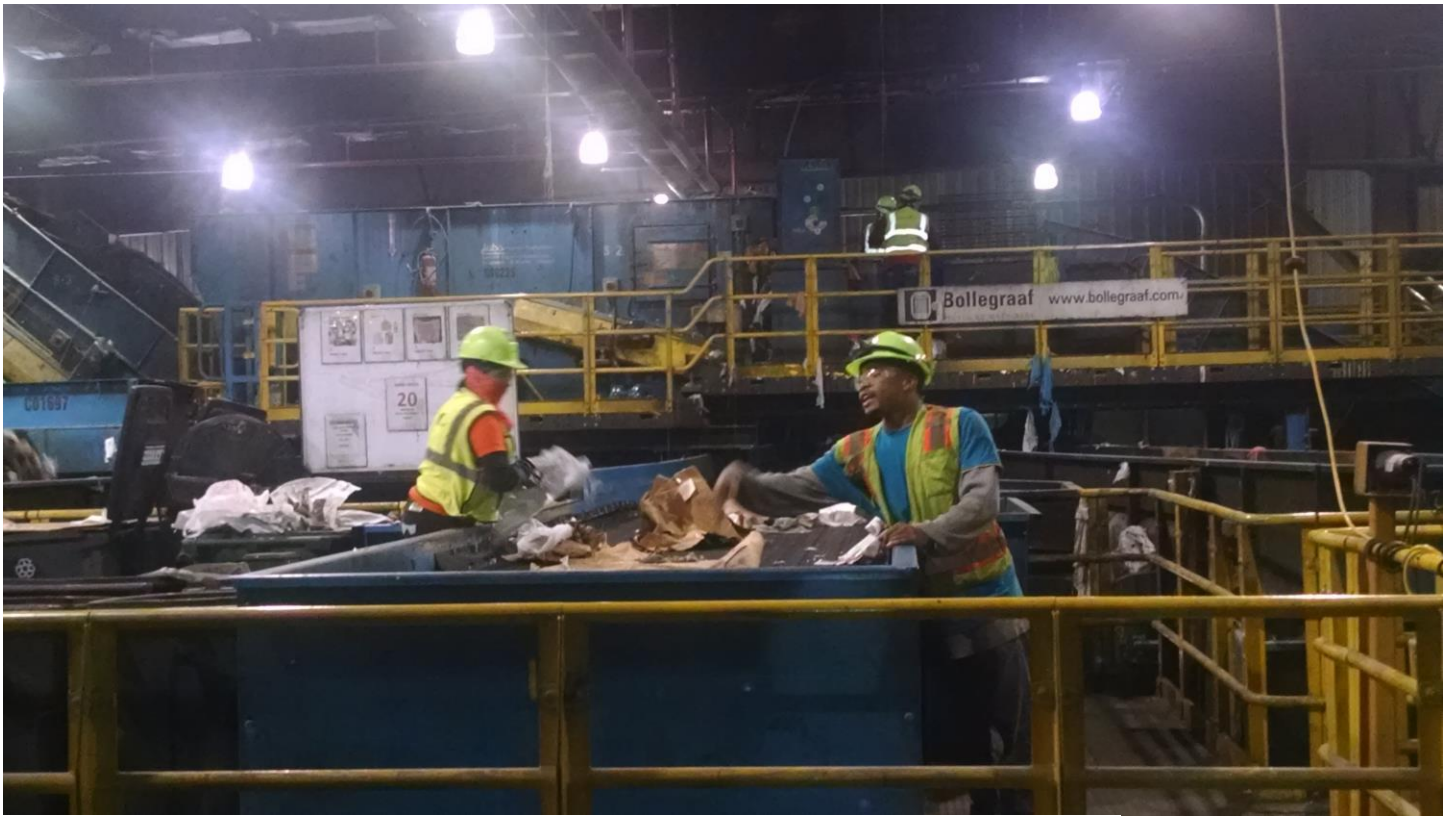
Erin Josephitis & Susan Barnett

Erin Josephitis
Environmental Coordinator
Department of Public Works
City of Greenbelt
555 Crescent Road
Greenbelt, MD 20770
Phone: (240) 542-2168
Email: ejosephitis@greenbeltmd.gov

Susan Barnett
Zero Waste Circle
Susnbarn@earthlink.net
301-474-7465

Conveyer belt separates recyclables at MRF. Photo by Erin Josephitis.

Cubes of recyclable aluminum cans at MRF. Photo by Erin Josephitis.



Materials are mechanically and manually separated at MRF. Photo by Erin Josephitis.