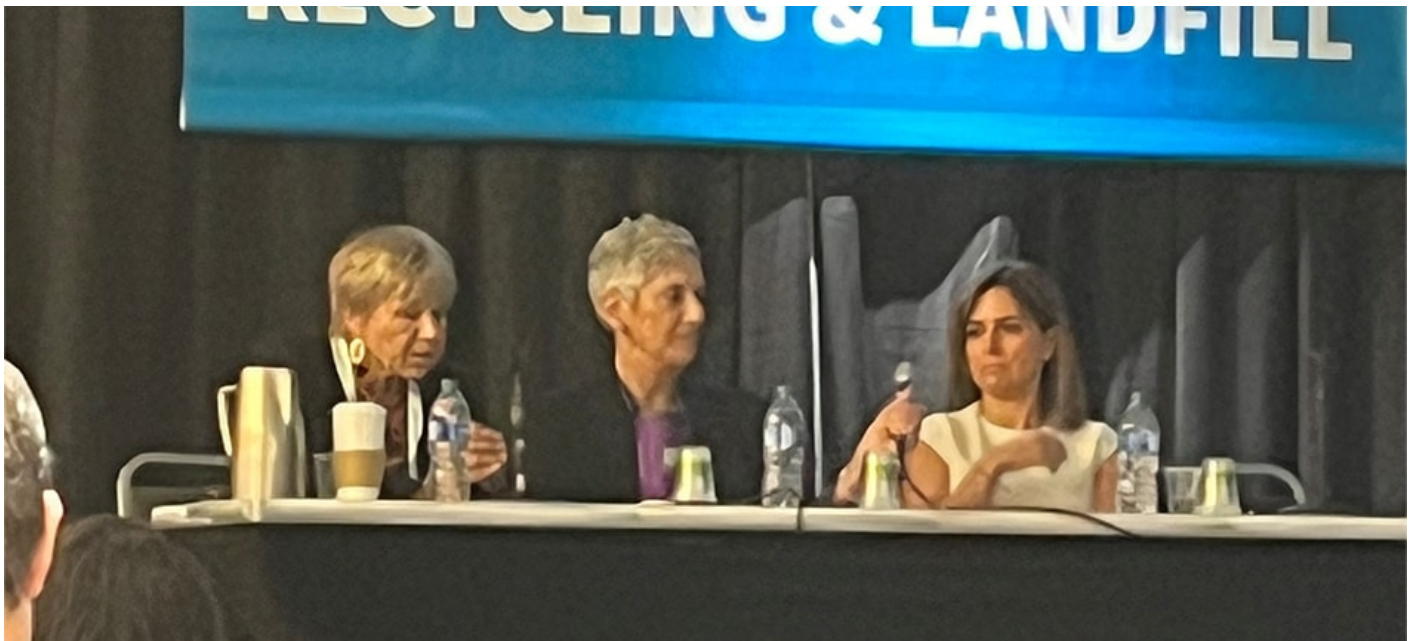


## WasteExpo 2023: Making multifamily recycling work for all

The session explores what makes recycling at multifamily residences difficult to implement and potential paths forward for tenants, property managers and MRFs.



BY CHRIS VOLOSCHUK | MAY 23, 2023

Kim Braun remembers what she heard about multifamily recycling when she first moved to California more than two decades ago.

It was the sound of silence.

“When I moved to California, I got a key and that’s about it,” said Braun, who moved from Trenton, New Jersey, to Marina Del Ray after taking on the role of materials recovery superintendent for the city of Santa Monica in 1997. I didn’t know where the recycling bin was. I didn’t know what I could and couldn’t recycle.

“I used to live in Marina Del Ray, and my facility had 948 units,” she continued. “The [recycling bin] was far away from where my condo was. I was on the second floor, so I had to walk down the stairs, across the driveway over to another building, all the way to the back [behind the building] just to recycle. Am I going to do that every day? I don’t think so.”

Braun spent 20 years working for the city of Santa Monica and was promoted to the city’s resource recovery and recycling manager in 2009. She was responsible for the trash, recycling and organics collection programs for residents and businesses citywide. Before her retirement in 2021, she spent five years as the environmental programs and operations manager for Culver City. Since, she’s served as president of Braun Consulting Services, which assists municipalities, counties and businesses with state-mandated reporting; sustainability planning; implementing recycling, organics and food recovery programs; as well as writing grant applications, contracts, agreements and other administrative needs.

Recently, Braun joined Long Beach, California-based SCS Engineers Senior Vice President Michelle Leonard; Vaughan, Ontario-based GFL Environmental Director of Business Development Stephanie Sidler; and West Chester, Pennsylvania-based LKACo LLC owner Laura Askin to discuss the difficulties of implementing recycling programs at multifamily properties at WasteExpo 2023 in New Orleans.

During the session, *Why is Multifamily Recycling So Hard?*, the panelists looked at factors such as education, convenience, infrastructure and more to understand why the task has remained difficult, and possible steps property managers can take to increase recycling.

### **A challenging landscape**

According to a study conducted by Germany based Statista in 2018, the US had 56.15 million multifamily homes, and the number is expected to reach 155.25 million this year. Leonard said often facilities encounter obstacles to running recycling programs.

“Often, it’s not one size fits all for every apartment complex,” she said. “Multifamily and apartment buildings vary in size. It could be 50 units, it could be 150 units. They may also be in an urban setting or a more suburban setting. All those are going to impact the success of a program. Understanding their unique situation is important, and [so is] listening to what on-site workers have to say.”

Leonard described a property manager as an “on-site champion,” the person who is a vital partner in any successful multifamily recycling program. She also suggested listening to maintenance and landscaping workers’ feedback. “They’re vital to the management of the facility as well,” Leonard said. “And they could be the people moving the bins around, too. You want to engage these people early and engage them often. What we’ve found is you have to listen to what they’re saying.”

Along with a property’s size and location, Leonard said demographics, the varying ages of residents and their motivation to recycle all play roles. “Some people recycle because it’s the right thing to do,” she said. “Others don’t care, or they don’t have time. You need to manage those different attitudes. ... You may have different languages as well, and that’s an important aspect.

“There are different age ranges,” she continued. “Some may be actively employed, and others retired, and that will impact them leaving early and coming back at night or if they’re home all day long. Also, there’s owners versus renters and how they see their living space. They might look at [recycling] differently if they’re an owner.”

### **Convenience and contamination**

As Braun mentioned regarding her long journeys to her Marina Del Ray recycling bin, proximity matters in a multifamily recycling setup. The panelists agreed the tougher it is to get recyclables to their proper destination, the more likely those materials are to wind up in the trash.

Sidler, currently a resident in a multifamily community in Toronto, said her path toward recycling isn’t much easier and the complication has led to contamination. Though GFL recovered more than 1.2 million tons of material in 2021, contamination in loads entering material recovery facilities (MRFs) makes processing items more difficult and more costly.

“My building has two bins for recycling, but you have to go all the way downstairs to find the bins, and even then, it’s very contaminated,” Sidler said. “It’s contaminated with large, bulky items because, if you live in a multifamily building, you might not have the opportunity to dispose of large, bulky items at the curb like single family residents [do]. It’s really different contamination that we get from multifamily than single family [at our MRFs] you see things like blankets, hoses, just about everything. Nothing surprises me anymore.”

Sidler echoed Leonard's view that multifamily residences can be diverse and present language barriers that make it hard to communicate about what can and can't be recycled. "I think most of the time people are trying to do the right thing—which we call 'wish-cycling'—where they put things in the bin that they hope we can recycle, but we often can't," she said. "There's a more transient population in and out of multifamily facilities a lot of the time. And there's often newcomers in the city, and program rules can change depending on the city. So, it's hard to keep those programs clean and in place."

Physical placement of recycling bins on a property also can determine the success or failure of a multifamily program.

"You get your recycling in a 2-yard [dumpster] in a garage, and everybody does that," Braun said. "But is it right next to the trash dumpster? Because, if it is, then you're really in trouble because when that trash dumpster gets full, what are people going to do? They're going to dump their trash in the recycling dumpster. So there really should be a little bit of separation, so you can avoid that overflowing trash contamination."

Additionally, Braun said simply flattening cardboard boxes prior to placing them in the recycling container can help cut down on material overflows.

### **Improving recycling**

The panelists agreed that recycling programs at multifamily properties can be successful, benefiting residents, property owners and the MRFs processing loads, and it starts with education. Leonard said property managers should take every available opportunity to engage tenants and provide recycling outreach. She recommended speaking to them or placing recycling program signage in common areas, such as at the mailboxes, swimming pool or parking lots.

"Whether it's distributing bags or bins for the units or doing door to door technical assistance, that's an opportunity to touch someone and inform them of the program to gauge their participation in the program and get some feedback from them," Leonard said. "Is it working, or are there adjustments necessary? ... It also could be providing a bin at the mailbox for recyclables, so they don't get thrown away."

Leonard added that parking lots and structures need to be clean and well-lit, with fencing around recycling areas. “We all know if it’s not convenient and if someone doesn’t feel safe and it’s not clean and it’s dirty and messy, they’re not going to use it,” she said.

Next, Leonard suggested rewarding tenants for “doing the right thing,” and following up with them after a program’s implementation to solve ongoing challenges.

“You could recognize individual tenants, or maybe tell people how you’re doing in a newsletter, let them know you’ve recycled 100 pounds of recyclables this month,” she said.

“Rewarding them, recognizing them for their participation. In my opinion, doing the carrot before the stick is preferable. However, there are many states that have requirements for multifamily, with some penalties for violations. One of the considerations is, do you pass that on to your tenants, your renters, your lease holders, so they bear some of the responsibility in that?”

At the municipal level, Braun suggested applying for grants for recycling education and outreach. When she worked in Culver City, a grant from The Recycling Partnership, Washington, made a difference.

“We had one very large multifamily development that was both apartments, condos and townhomes that didn’t recycle, and we had to get them on board to the program,” she said. “The Recycling Partnership was great. They gave us a lot of money to buy education and outreach brochures, little containers for the townhome people to keep in their house and a couple other really good pieces of information to get the program implemented.”

Braun said she believes it’s also very important to have city and county staff work with a franchise hauler—if they use one—to perform audits to figure out what’s happening and how much of a property’s recycling is contaminated. “You want to see the reports and make sure it’s a route that is mostly multifamily,” Braun said. “See how much really is recycled and how much went for disposal. What’s your residual waste there?”

Along with the possibility of recognizing tenants for good recycling habits, Braun said there also should be incentives written into hauler contracts once municipalities discern what benchmarks a successful program should reach. “Why not give them a little more money in their contract as an incentive, or why not give the property manager an additional day of service if they’re a successful recycling program without the fee?” she said. “These are absolutely necessary. ... Municipalities should work with a franchise hauler and provide an incentive piece based upon what your percentage of contamination should be. If you think 10 percent is successful, and your hauler can do that successfully, then you should provide that incentive to your hauler in their contract.”

Braun and Sidler agreed that material audits provide great insight into what problematic items are making their way into recycling. GFL's largest MRF campus in Toronto features a material composition analysis center where teams of auditors sort and categorize more than 440,000 tons of material each year. They work to figure out what's coming into GFL's MRFs so the company can design facilities and upgrade them to handle those materials.

"That also helps our municipal partners because we often communicate with them about what's in the stream and what the problematic materials are," Sidler said. "When we see things like propane tanks and things like that, we can communicate with our partners what load it came in on, and they can go back to that household or that area and point out what they're seeing and do targeted campaigns for those types of contamination."

Inside the MRF, Sidler said implementing clear receiving procedures is important so staff can push away harmful material that could adversely affect employees or equipment. Also important is providing training so workers know what is and isn't acceptable.

Braun and Sidler also said municipalities and MRFs can work together by providing waste management guidelines for architects to follow as a multifamily structure is being built.

"All new development agreements, before they build anything, have to show the planning, building and safety departments their plans in your city," Braun said. "Before they build anything, they have to go to planning and show their concept design and show what the building's going to look like. Every department has requirements, like police and fire departments, and then there's [Americans with Disabilities Act] compliance and things like that. But there's not really any requirements for trash.

"I'm negotiating in Culver City and Santa Monica to have a waste management plan," she added. "If you're going to want to do a successful recycling program, one of the things I highly recommend is that you work with your other departments to put in some sort of waste management plan requirement in the build."