Recycling and clean streets

On Tuesday, we noted that Pottstown is now piloting a “first-in-the-nation” program to recycle flexible plastic, thanks to an initiative by our trash hauler, J.P. Mascaro, and numerous partner corporations.

The following essay by Julia Ross, a former U.S. Fulbright scholar in Taiwan, shows how much our culture needs to change to protect the environment by eliminating waste.

BY JULIA ROSS

When I planned for my year in Taiwan two summers ago, trash was the last thing on my mind. The more obvious challenges of moving abroad -- finding an apartment, buying a cellphone and navigating the bus system -- preoccupied me in the weeks before my departure.

But strange things happen when you cross cultures. Habits ingrained over years suddenly come up for negotiation. So it was for me and waste disposal.

On this leaf-shaped island of 23 million people 100 miles off China’s coast, trash matters. My Taipei landlady was the first to make that point, when she gave me a crash course on how to dispose of household waste like a local. First, buy city-approved trash bags at the corner 7-Eleven. Then, meet the garbage truck five nights a week at the mouth of a nearby alley. Finally, heave the bags onto the truck yourself.

Understanding the mandatory recycling system was more troublesome. In Taiwan, recycling trucks tag along behind trash collectors, but they accept only certain items on certain nights. According to the strictly enforced schedule, plastic bottles must be separated from plastic wrapping and bags, and flat recyclables, such as cardboard boxes, are collected only on Mondays and Fridays.

Waiting for the garbage truck is one of Taiwan’s liveliest communal rites. Many evenings I watched food vendors from the night markets, buckets of eggshells in hand, chat up convenience store clerks alongside Filipina nannies. An alderman with a whistle kept traffic at bay.

These curbside jaunts were my initiation into Taiwan’s broader waste-disposal network, made up of municipal employees and regular citizens all doing their part to keep the system humming.

I admired the swift vigilance of food court employees as they swept fast-food wrappers and Styrofoam cups off my table into baskets before I had time to look for a trash can. (There aren’t any.)

Taiwanese friends tell me that 10 years ago, their capital’s sidewalks were drowning in garbage.

You’d never know it today, thanks to the introduction of a per-bag trash-collection fee to discourage consumption, a charge for plastic bags at supermarkets and the rigorous recycling policy now in effect.

These changes created an infinitely cleaner city. Even more impressive, they fueled a sense of civic responsibility. There’s a palpable appreciation for hard-won progress.

Before my year in Taiwan, I was a lazy environmentalist, dutifully recycling wine bottles and newspapers, but never willing to go the extra mile if it wasn’t convenient. It’s no longer so easy to make excuses. Living in a place where I was expected to use what I bought and recycle every last yogurt cup and juice box left me with a new appreciation for what clean streets mean in a civil society, and the realization that I’m responsible for everything I consume. That’s as good a Chinese lesson as any.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

EVERY NIGHT IS RECYCLING NIGHT IN TAIWAN