

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Science and plastic pollution

Let us step back from our election excitement and consider two important initiatives for the future well-being of the planet that can largely be done by the private sector.

After 5,000 years of civilization, the human population has mushroomed from 1 billion in 1820 to nearly 8 billion today. As our numbers have increased, so too has our impact on the environment, polluting the planet and snuffing out other species in record numbers.

A major source of pollution is one of the world's most common manufactured materials: plastic. Worldwide production has skyrocketed from 2 million tons in 1950 to more than 380 million tons today.

The very qualities that make plastic so popular — it's cheap, versatile, lightweight, and long-lasting — also means it doesn't biodegrade in a landfill.

More than half of the world's plastic is landfilled and about a quarter is incinerated.

For years, America shipped its waste plastics to China, but China and other southeastern Asian countries began banning these imports starting in 2018, because nobody can figure out how to recycle them.

In fact, in 2016, the last year for which comprehensive data is available, only 9 percent of plastic waste was recycled.

More than 8 metric million tons of plastic waste ends up in our oceans annually, killing birds and marine life through entanglement and ingestion.

If current trends continue, the

amount of waste in the oceans will triple in about 20 years.

Last year, Pottstown became part of a small but significant effort to recycle more plastic.

The borough's trash hauler, J.P. Mascaro, has been collecting recycled materials in blue bins from

Pottstown's 8,000 residential customers for 11 years. Starting last fall, residents have also been able to throw all kinds of flexible plastic into the bins with other recyclables.

Until now, flexible plastic has been particularly difficult to recycle because it gums up conventional

sorting equipment.

Mascaro has installed automatic optical equipment in its Exeter recycling facility that can sort out flexible plastic for bailing.

It is then shipped to companies that convert the material into Rflex, a base material used to make curbs and sidewalks, shipping pallets, thick mats, and other products.

Meanwhile, a French company, working with universities in England and the U.S., has developed an enzyme that can break down plastic bottles into their original chemical components, making it possible to make new bottles from old ones.

Plastic bottles make up about one-sixth of the world's annual plastic production. The discovery could be put into practical application within two years, officials said. The first plant is being built in France.

Thursday: Pennsylvania's first carbon neutral colleges.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton



RECYCLING FACILITY — J.P. Mascaro's 75,000 square foot recycling facility in Exeter Township, which recycles 700 tons of materials a day, has new state-of-the-art equipment that can sort flexible plastic like grocery bags and food pouches for recycling.