

Blue Cart Program
Preliminary Resource Paper
Chicago Recycling Coalition
www.chicagorecycling.org



Issue: *Bringing recycling for households served by the Department of Streets and Sanitation (DSS) up to the standards expected in a first-rate city.*

History and Background

In late 1995, the City of Chicago implemented the blue bag recycling program that was a colossal failure. The city finally admitted this in 2008 when the program ended and blue cart recycling (which CRC strongly advocated for) began to be rolled out with partial support from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) for cart purchases. At that time the city committed to a full rollout by 2011. As expected, the results from areas that received blue carts have been much better than was ever achieved by the blue bag program.

In 2009 the city suspended the rollout, citing budget constraints, with blue carts provided to only 241,000 out of the 600,000 households served by DSS. This leaves the majority of households without a real recycling program; their only option is drop-off centers. The city has also cut back on the frequency of summer yard waste pick-up to every other week. Reduced frequency of yard waste pick-up diminishes the effectiveness of the program because residents do not like to stockpile organic waste during hot weather. Without a citywide program, it is impossible to do effective large-scale educational efforts because they cannot be targeted to the one-third of households who have recycling, without confusing the two-thirds that don't.

Current Plans/State of Affairs

The city has already begun to make plans to restart the expansion of the blue cart program with a recent request for proposal (RFP) for privatization of the program. However, while the bid tabulations have been posted; no public announcement of the winning bidders has yet been made. The bids appear to be vastly different (with bids for covering all the service areas ranging from \$1.2 million to \$63.3 million), but information that could explain this variance is not publically available. This lack of transparency and rush to move forward calls into question what exactly Chicago will get by outsourcing the program, a scenario that, given other recent outsourcing events, causes consternation.

Chicago Recycling Coalition Policy Proposals

While CRC is eager to expand the blue cart program, we have concerns about the rush to privatize and the lack of community participation in the planning for expansion. The limited information that is available about the recent RFP results indicates that there may be significant open issues about what is the best approach for the city. Just one example would be that the RFP appears to allow the vendor to keep the entire revenue from the sale of the collected materials. A revenue sharing approach may be more favorable.

CRC recommends that the city not award a contract from this RFP and instead step back and create a more inclusive public process to develop a citywide expansion plan that evaluates current practices in Chicago, best practices from other cities and develops benchmarks for measuring new program proposals. Even with this new approach, CRC believes that the blue cart program can be expanded citywide over the next four years. A full citywide program can leverage cost savings through use of a grid pick-up system, outside revenue sources (e.g., DCEO, corporate sponsorship) for cart deployment, and increased media-based education. The CRC also suggests implementing a Pay-As-You-Throw program, which could raise additional revenue while encouraging less waste.

In the meantime, CRC recommends that yard waste collection in areas served by the blue cart be on a weekly basis this summer as an immediate commitment to improving recycling in Chicago—i.e., something that can be achieved in the first 100 days. If resources are available, blue cart collection should also be made weekly rather than the every other week currently in place.