

A Trashed Economy Foretold: Intake at Landfills Has Been Falling

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Along with the stock market and the foreclosure rate, a less-heralded barometer has signaled the arrival of hard times: the landfill. In an extravagantly wasteful society that typically puts 254 million tons of unwanted stuff at the curb to be thrown away each year, landfill managers say they knew something was amiss in the economy when they saw **trash levels start steadily dropping** last year. Now, some are reporting declines **as sharp as 30 percent**. "The trash man is the first one to know about a recession because we see it first," said Richard S. Weber, manager of the [Loudoun County](#) landfill. "Circuit City's closing, so people aren't going there and buying those big boxes of stuff and throwing away all that Styrofoam and shrink-wrap . . . and whatever they were replacing." Trash volume has dropped so much, Weber said, that instead of running out of space in 2012, as had been projected, the Loudoun landfill will gain a year and a half or so of use. "That's huge," he said.

In Prince William County, which has been particularly hard hit with foreclosures, the amount of discarded refrigerators, washers, dryers and other appliances that are usually sent to the landfill has fallen by 20 percent since the recession started. "People aren't buying new," said Tom Smith, solid waste program manager. "They're making do with what they have." It's all part of the cycle of stuff that people in the trash business say they've seen in every **economic downturn** since the end of World War II. People don't buy stuff, **so there's less packaging -- which typically makes up one-third of all landfill trash --** to toss. With a drop in demand, manufacturers make less, creating less waste. More vacant homes and fewer people in a community mean less trash. A stagnant housing market means less construction debris. On tight budgets, people eat out less, so restaurants order less, so there's less to throw away. Landscapers are out of work, so there's less yard debris. At the Montgomery County transfer station, it wasn't unusual to see as many as 40 garbage trucks waiting in a line that snaked nearly a mile back to the entrance gate on Shady Grove Road to dump their loads. "Now, there's virtually no line," manager Peter Karasik said. "Ever." Even in Virginia, which takes in more out-of-state garbage than any state save one, trash men began noticing declines in late 2007 of 10 to 20 percent. "And normally garbage is a pretty steady business because everybody wants to get rid of it," said Richard Doucette, a waste program manager with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. Now, he said, some landfills are laying off workers.

Finally, said Ben Boxer, spokesman for Fairfax County's solid waste management program, the economy is forcing people to heed the environmentalists' mantra: Reduce! Reuse! Recycle! Repair! "A lot of these things that people throw away do have a valuable second life," he said, "especially for those who, now more than ever, are going to be facing difficult times." In better times, Boxer has seen perfectly usable sofas crammed into dumpsters. But now, instead of ending up at the dump, stuff is being repaired and kept or traded on Web sites such as Freecycle.org, where as many as 70,000 people a week have been registering to swap stuff since the recession officially began in the fall. Americans might not be saving string and rubber bands like their grandparents did during the Great Depression. But as the recession drags on, they are clearly rethinking the way they use their plentiful stuff.

These are the kinds of times that compel Paul Zehfuss to drive about 15 minutes from Springfield to Alexandria during his lunch hour to a new store that sells only batteries to get a little more life out of his electric toothbrush. In other times, Zehfuss would have "absolutely" tossed the thing. His two-year-old silver Braun would have become just another ounce in what some environmental groups calculate as the 25,000 tons of "I realize this is kind of stupid," Zehfuss said. "But I'd rather replace the battery right now than buy new." The saga of the broken toothbrush is telling: Batteries Plus is one of the few stores in this economy that is doing such brisk business that it's expanding. Its whole reason for

being is to help people preserve their stuff -- power tools, cameras, appliances, alarms, sump pumps, cellphone chargers -- rather than send it to the landfill. Auto repair. Appliance repair. Computer repair. Many such providers in the region are reporting steady, if not increasing, business. "Right now, I have broken machinery everywhere," said Brian McElroy, a shop manager at Friendly Computers in Herndon. "Some machines are on the verge of being boat anchors -- they should throw them away instead of fix them." In better times, Americans do toss them.

The Environmental Protection Agency says 2 million tons of tech trash winds up in landfills each year, as do 100 million cellphones. "There are laptops that I would personally shoot if I walked in here with one," McElroy said. "But people are weighing replacing an operating system for \$500 or buying new for \$600 and opting to save the \$100." It comes as no surprise to economists that during recessions, consumers -- whose spending drives 70 percent of the U.S. economy -- choose to repair their stuff instead of throw it away. Louis Johnston, an economist at the College of St. Benedict in Collegeville, Minn., combed through Commerce Department data and found that during recessions, people tend to spend 5 percent of their household budgets on repairs. In good times, repair spending falls -- in recent years to below 1 percent. "People need to know what the future's going to look like in order to plan for it," Johnston said. "The more uncertain it is, the more likely people are to just stop or walk in place."

That dictum might be seen most clearly with the stuff we wear. Retail sales have fallen or remained flat for the past five months. People aren't buying new clothes or donating their old ones. Sales are up at Goodwill's nine Washington area thrift stores -- 52 percent in January alone -- but donations have fallen so much that the charity has been forced to advertise for them for the first time. "If we're not able to increase the donations coming in, we run the risk of not being able to meet the increasing shopper demand," said Brendan Hurley, vice president for marketing and communications at Goodwill. People aren't throwing clothes away, either. The EPA says Americans discarded 7 million tons of clothing and footwear in 2007. But this year, more people are following Cathy Willis's example. Willis had a trunk of old sweaters and chose to "update" them instead of tossing them, donating them or buying something new. She found Elinor Coleman, an expert "rebuttoner," and on a recent day the two huddled over a pile of sweaters and scads of vintage buttons to reimagine her wardrobe. "If I knew my job was more stable," said Willis, who works for a nonprofit group, "I'd probably be out buying new clothes."

But will the reuse and repair trend last in our throwaway society? Julia Bovey, spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, says yes. "I think we're seeing a change in culture." However, Chaz Miller, director of state programs for the National Solid Wastes Management Association, predicts that once good times roll again, so will the garbage. "We as individuals tend to be very acquisitive," he said. "We call people saints who get by on very little voluntarily. We say we'd like to emulate that, but in reality, very few of us do." **The most lasting change to the waste stream -- manufacturers cutting down on packaging -- was well underway before the recession, he said, and will stick because it saves companies money.** Wal-Mart has promised to cut packaging by 5 percent. Amazon, McDonald's, Heinz, Coca-Cola -- all have redesigned products and packaging to reduce waste. Cadbury has come out with chocolate eco-eggs to reduce the amount of plastic used in packaging every year by more than 200 tons.

So whatever became of Paul Zehfuss's broken toothbrush? Sadly, electric toothbrushes, like electric razors, exemplify the principal of "planned obsolescence." With their battery cases soldered shut, neither can be easily fixed. "They did absolutely everything they could," Zehfuss sighed. He bought a new one at Costco. And, much to his chagrin, his old toothbrush, after spending a while on a Batteries Plus shelf as a "teaching tool," will indeed be on its way to the trash.