

The City of Madison began separating recyclables from going into the landfill long before the Recycling Act of 1991. The City started with recycling bundled newspaper back in 1968. Over time, recycling efforts expanded greatly, offering opportunities to recycle plastic, metal, glass, and mixed paper in home collection carts and various items at the drop-off sites, like electronics, household batteries, and Styrofoam. In 2016, city efforts have led the recycling and diverting of over 110,000 tons of material from the landfill.

Our success does not mean the work is done. In 2016, over 185,000 tons of waste material was generated from the City of Madison – meaning at least 75,000 tons of stuff from City of Madison residents was sent to the landfill. We can do better.

A landfill, including the Dane County Landfill, which is the one Madison currently uses for our unwanted junk, have a finite amount of space. More landfill space will only be achieved by transforming some of the best farmland in the world into a place to bury unwanted things. A new landfill is also a lengthy, very expensive and highly politically sensitive process. Any future site is also likely to be located farther away from the City, which increases all the costs associated with hauling, dumping, and transporting material – and this does not include the environmental impact such a development would undoubtedly cause.

Those truths regarding a landfill and Madison’s long commitment to recycling led the Madison’s Sustainability Plan and the Madison Results guidelines have set down a lofty challenge for the City: zero waste by 2050.

The term “zero waste” has many potential definitions. Madison’s definition of zero waste will be to send zero recyclable waste sent to the landfill. This means the City will commit to taking advantage of each practical opportunity that is available to stop material from being sent to the landfill.

This plan recognizes that some waste materials, such as disposable diapers and pet waste, are currently not recyclable or preventable at the municipal level today.

The plan also acknowledges that the term recyclable will be ever-shifting, as recycling technology changes along with changes to the waste stream and to the products we consume. There may be a time when presently non-recyclable items, like a disposable diaper, can be diverted from the landfill. As a city we must maintain our aspirations of all waste material being recyclable or preventable while holding

Ultimately, this plan is meant to offer concrete, near-term steps that honor the City’s commitment to achieving our definition of zero waste by maximizing recycling at any given moment, and honor the values residents place on a solid waste collection system, and the values and history the City as a whole must strive to represent.

