

# Near-zero landfilling: How it can be done

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HOUGHTON - It's expensive to transport recyclables from Houghton County to markets where they can be sold, and that's the most commonly cited reason the county recycles only about 5 percent of its waste, with the rest landfilled.

San Francisco, on the other hand, has all the advantages of a major urban area. It has got industrial recycling facilities of all sorts right in the neighborhood and capital to invest in public programs, not to mention Left Coast political attitudes that encourage public investment in green initiatives. They do a little better, reusing, repurposing, composting and recycling 78 percent of their trash, with a goal of reaching zero landfilled waste by 2020.

On Thursday, Copper Country residents had the chance to learn how San Francisco flipped the waste equation when the documentary "Racing to Zero" was screened at Michigan Tech as part of the 2016 Green Film Series. Afterward, leaders from the Copper Country Recycling Initiative (CCRI) facilitated a discussion about which successful San Francisco strategies might work here.

## Article Photos



Image provided by Trash24 Productions

A electronics recycler explains how his workers break down old computers and appliances into components that can be reused, recycled and stripped of dangerous chemicals, in this shot from the documentary "Racing to Zero." The film was screened at Michigan Tech Thursday.

"This is our fifth season of the Green Film Series, and some are very depressing, but with this I come away thinking this is doable," said Evan MacDonald, co-chairman of the CCRI and executive director of the Keweenaw Land Trust.

Wisconsin waste contractor Eagle Waste is expected to be bidding on Houghton's and Hancock's waste disposal contracts when they come up this summer, said Suzanne Van Dam, CCRI co-chairwoman. If they win out, that would bring curbside recycling to Houghton and more regular door-to-door pickup to Hancock, as well as glass recycling and a business model that profits more from recycling than landfilling.

A big part of change is just getting people behind that and other recycling and waste reduction efforts, Van Dam said.

"When we started cardboard recycling, people said that would never happen here, but it did," Van Dam said. "It's about changing cultural norms."

Another huge opportunity lies in composting, MacDonald said.

"Something like half of what's going into the landfill is compostable," he added.

Paper that isn't recyclable can usually be composted, for one thing, according to the film, and San Francisco considers composting a third waste stream along with trash and recyclables, and picks it up along with the others.

"They do it in Marquette, and that's something I think we could do in this community," MacDonald said. "That's the low-hanging fruit."

Even without public programs, composting at home can be pretty simple, noted audience member Pete Eckstrom. Even just mowing leaves back into the lawn is a start, he said.

Purchasing choices and packaging are also important, noted CCRI member David Hall. Styrofoam can be recycled, but much of it isn't, for example. Paper cups can be composted and are a better alternative.

To maximize your personal contribution, keep up on the recycling and reuse opportunities that are available. Van Dam said an up-to-date list is on the CCRI's web site at [coppercountryrecyclereuse.com](http://coppercountryrecyclereuse.com)

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