



## Trash to Treasure

### Bay State Textiles puts a value on reduce/recycle

By Helen Graves

If Paul Curry, founder of recycler Bay State Textiles, could get one message out to the public, it would be: Stop throwing old clothes into the trash!

Ripped T-shirts, hole-in-the-knee jeans, worn-out socks, broken-down shoes, ratty towels, threadbare sheets, stained tablecloths – Curry wants them all. Broken zippers don't faze him. Nor do last year's styles.

Contrary to popular belief, "gently used" is not the mantra of this or most any textile recycler. Instead, it's "anything that's clean and dry."

"The problem that leads people to throw away their clothes is misinformation," Curry says. So he is on a mission to change people's perception of what can be given vs. thrown away. "There are customers all over the world for this material," he says.

About 95 percent of all used textiles – a category that, besides clothing and linens, includes stuffed animals, curtains, purses and belts – can be recycled or repurposed.

What can't be sold again as is or with minor fixing can be turned into wiping cloths, insulation, furniture stuffing, carpet pads, soundproofing and such, or respun into new fibers. Even zippers and buttons are mined for reuse.

On the other side of the coin, textiles comprise nearly 5 percent, or 230,000 tons, of solid waste in Massachusetts, according to a 2011 Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection study. According to the federal EPA, only 15 percent of discarded textiles nationwide were recovered for recycling in 2010.

Enter Curry and Bay State Textiles, based in Pembroke, offering solutions in a number of ways:

- Taking textiles out of the waste stream, thereby saving towns in their per-ton disposal costs;
- Paying towns \$100 a ton for textiles collected at transfer stations in white trailers bearing the toothy, sunglasses-wearing sun logo;
- Educating with school textile recycling programs that pay each school \$100 per ton for



textiles collected; and

- Shipping out the used textiles for sorting and dissemination.

"We're in the raw materials business," Curry says. "We're collecting it, servicing the boxes, bringing it into the warehouse and making 1,000-pound bales. Everything is still mixed. We have customers that will grade the product."

#### Leveraging demand

When Curry was a business student studying overseas, he took note of the huge demand for Americana.

"I started out in my mid-20s shipping surplus goods to Japan and they started asking me for used clothing. I thought they were crazy," Curry says. "The Japanese taught me the business. There were literally thousands of mom-and-pop boutiques all over Japan selling used clothing – logo T-shirts, blue jeans, leather jackets, high school letter jackets, Nike and Converse sneakers. In addition, my suppliers were shipping millions of pounds of clothing every year and had markets in Africa and South America."

The rag houses, the businesses that did the sorting or "grading," were fighting for goods because of a shortage of materials. Curry did some research, found a federal government study from the late 1980s noting that landfills, not charities, were the typical recipients of used textiles, and put together a business plan. With a partner, Curry launched Bay State Textiles in 2005 to help address the materials shortage.

Today, Bay State Textiles employs six full-timers and hires three to four temps a day during the busy season, which is just about every month except the dead of winter and the last few weeks of summer, with spikes after back-to-school shopping and Christmas.

This year, the company is projected to reclaim approximately 2,400-plus tons of textiles in

Massachusetts.

The textile recycling business, Curry says, is like the commodities market. He deals with the ups and downs of prices, the highs and lows of the U.S. dollar, the economies of developing countries and the potential for change in the supply-demand ratio as more textiles are reclaimed.

Rather than worry that a textile recycling bubble could burst, Curry is focused on getting textiles out of the waste stream and educating people on how to participate in the recycling effort.

To date, Bay State Textiles' trailers can be found in some 50 Massachusetts municipalities. "We don't push our trailers, but provide them as an option," Curry says. "We're a for-profit, so we're providing some revenue to the town while saving them money from tipping fees."

While sights are set on expanding the number of towns participating in textile recycling, Bay State Textiles, however, may find that its school partnerships are the most valuable arm of the business, and not just in income.

In less than a year, the pilot partnership with the Weymouth Public Schools, launched last April, netted 60 tons of textiles – a savings of \$95 per ton out of the town's disposal costs and a \$100 per ton payment to individual schools.

Curry doesn't stop there with services benefiting the town. Last fall, he provided a \$4,000 townwide mailing to promote the Weymouth school textile recycling program and spent \$2,500 to help sponsor the schools' sustainable earth day. "To keep things going, I know I have to pay above the \$100," he says.

Funds raised at the Weymouth schools will go toward STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and arts enrichment, says Betsy Harris, the schools' community relations liaison.

The program has been so successful that Mass.

DEP is writing a case study about it and other schools are getting on board.

#### Engaging communities

David Quinn, regional waste reduction coordinator for Barnstable County, knows Bay State Textiles from its trailers in Cape transfer stations and is in the early stages of working with the company and interested PTOs to launch district-wide programs like Weymouth's.

"From a regional reducing-our-waste perspective, having a program like this in the schools is a great way to start out early and teach where this material will end up," he says.

Michelle Constantino, Plymouth Public Schools' community engagement liaison, heard good things about the Weymouth program and Bay State Textiles. Plymouth launched its textile recycling program this spring.

"It's a fabulous fundraiser for the schools, the youngest children can be involved, our marketing vocational program created the marketing materials and promotional plan, and it's a huge benefit to the town," Constantino says.

"When it will really get successful is when the businesses jump in," she adds, "when restaurants donate linens they can't use anymore, dry cleaners, different companies drive by a school and drop off old textiles. Businesses want to support the schools the best they can, and this is an easy way to do it."

The idea to partner with schools began when the Town of Weymouth contacted Curry about boosting the tonnage in its textile recycling.

"I said, 'Bring in all these people, I want to have a discussion: the school department, the DPW, Mass. DEP, the media.' I suggested putting donation boxes in every school to make textile recycling convenient for residents. I would cover logistics, service the boxes and pay each school \$100 a ton," Curry explains. "We started with 16 boxes in the Weymouth program and now have 110 donation boxes in schoolyards throughout Massachusetts."

As executive director of the South Shore Recycling Cooperative, Claire Sullivan is always looking for ways that towns can monetize their trash. Working with Bay State Textiles since its start, she is particularly appreciative of the company's contribution to the reduce-and-recycle effort.

"Paul has such tenacity and a real willingness to work with the towns," Sullivan says. "He understands that it takes time to build up these programs and is really investing a lot of effort and being generous in sharing his profits, some of which have yet to be realized, in order to build this up. We're very supportive of him because he has proven to be a very diligent partner." □

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