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## From Trash To Treasure

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### **From Trash To Treasure**

By Caleb Greenfield  
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It has been said that one man's trash is another man's treasure. This is exactly how recycling programs work. They collect the recycling and separate it into different categories: plastic, paper, and glass. Then they bundle it up and sell it on an open market, the same way farmers sell grain. In fact, in March of 2010, cardboard reached \$140 per ton!

Nebraskans recycle only about 15% of the trash we generate. When compared to the 2009 national average of 33.8% (EPA), we're not looking too good. A Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) study of the Bluff Road Landfill outside of Lincoln showed that the majority of the trash being dumped could have been recycled.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the bulk of the expense in the solid waste industry is in the actual collection of the waste, making up between 40-60% of the total cost of operation. Even during the height of the great recession in 2008, when prices for recyclables were at all time lows, it was still cheaper for a city to take a partial loss on recycling, than to take a total loss and send it as trash to a landfill and pay the tipping fee. In fact, there are studies that show nearly every municipal recycling program, either company-ran or city-ran, makes money. The question that I have is why Lincoln, and every other city, doesn't require mandatory recycling in this time of budget shortfalls, economic uncertainty, and environmental enlightenment.

Over Labor Day I visited Boulder, Colorado. While I was there I went to the farmer's market and a local festival. When I tried to throw my soda bottle away, the first place I found to put it was a clearly marked recycling bin; this interested me. I continued to look for trash bins and all I could find was more recycling bins, a typical trash-only bin could not be found anywhere.

Earlier in the year I also visited Toronto. While there I took a walking tour of the city, one of the first things that I noticed was the unusual trash bins outside the houses. One bin was blue, one was green, and one was brown. The blue bin, and also the largest, was for all recyclables that didn't have to be separated by the home owner. The brown bin, which was

about half the size of the blue, was for things that couldn't be recycled, such as mixed materials in packaging. Finally, the green bin, which was the smallest and came with a latching smell- and raccoon-proof lid, was for compostable material, such as food scraps and wet paper. I asked my guide how well the program had worked; he told me that after a short adjustment time it was no different than the typical trash system that was used in other cities he had lived. He also said that Toronto's public works raves about the benefits and cost savings that the program has had. Back in Boulder, on my way to my car, I noticed the same three bin system used in Toronto being used there. I thought that if two cities, of very different sizes, could implement the same program successfully, they could be on to something that could work for Lincoln.

My solution has two parts, first, we need to make the three bin trash program standard in every home and business in Lincoln; this would prevent the average customer from having to pay for trash and recycling separately, possibly lowering the total bill for the existing two-service customers. To facilitate this, the city would have to require the trash removal companies to switch to trucks that can handle two or three separate compartments that can be loaded and unloaded separately keep the different streams of trash separate until needed. This would allow the companies to only do single routes per week and possibly not increase collection costs, although it may increase the time it takes to complete the routes, preventing two or more routes per week could have large savings for the companies. This is a recommendation endorsed by the EPA.

The second part of my plan would be to eliminate all trash cans in public places. Most people throw trash away in the first receptacle that they find, almost unconsciously, so giving them no other choice but to put it into a recycling bin should increase recycling without increasing hassle. Incorporating these changes will make Lincoln a city that is looking towards the future and one that others envy.

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Important Data from study done at the landfill

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