Curbside Recycling Survey Final Report

City of Wilmington, Ohio
February 3, 2026

Prepared in Partnership with the Clinton County Solid Waste Management District

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Wilmington Curbside Recycling Survey

Overall Summary and Recommendation

Purpose of the Survey

The City of Wilmington conducted a community survey to understand resident use of, and sentiment toward, the curbside recycling program as the City considers options to address rising program costs.

Program Context

- Annual curbside recycling operating cost: approximately $120,000
- Future capital need: replacement collection truck estimated at approximately $425,000
- Approximately 5,100 households currently fund the program through monthly waste collection rates

What We Heard from Residents

Survey responses show strong overall support for keeping the curbside recycling program. A clear majority of respondents indicated that recycling is an important public service, environmentally responsible, and a core expectation of municipal waste collection.

Participation levels are high, with many respondents reporting weekly or bi-weekly use, indicating that the program is actively used and valued by residents.

Many respondents expressed concern about converting the program to a subscription-based model. If recycling became optional with a monthly fee, many indicated they would stop recycling altogether and place recyclable materials in the trash, while others would require additional garbage capacity.

Affordability-related comments were most often framed as a desire to keep recycling included in the base service. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that spreading costs across all households keeps the program affordable and equitable.

Environmental stewardship, waste reduction, and community responsibility were frequently cited as reasons to retain curbside recycling, which many residents view as a long-term community investment rather than an optional service.

Evaluation of the City's Options

- <u>Option 1 – Eliminate the program</u>: This option was strongly opposed by a majority of respondents and would result in increased landfill disposal and reduced municipal service levels.

- <u>Option 2 – Subscription-based program</u>: Responses suggest this option would significantly reduce participation, increase trash volumes, and disproportionately impact households on fixed or limited incomes.

- <u>Option 3 – Maintain program with a modest rate increase</u>: This option aligns most closely with resident feedback and preserves broad participation while minimizing per-household cost impacts.

Recommended Course of Action

Maintain the curbside recycling program as a universal service and modestly adjust the monthly waste collection rate to cover operating and future capital costs.

This approach reflects the will of the majority of residents, maintains environmental benefits, avoids increased landfill disposal, and preserves equity by sharing costs across the community.

Curbside Recycling Survey – Findings Report

City of Wilmington • February 3, 2026

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Executive Summary

Survey responses: 1,002 of approximately 5,100 customers (19.6% response rate).

Key takeaways:

- Current participation is strong among respondents: 93.3% report recycling at least occasionally, and 76.0% set recycling out weekly or every two weeks.

- If curbside recycling becomes voluntary with an estimated $5/month fee, intent shifts materially: 44.9% would subscribe, 37.0% would put recyclables in the trash (no extra toter), 12.1% would use drop-off, and 6.0% would likely need an additional garbage toter.

- Even among weekly recyclers, only 55.9% say they would subscribe; 35.9% would trash recyclables and 8.1% would switch to drop-off.

- Open-ended feedback is dominated by cost concerns, program convenience, and strong support for keeping recycling included in the base service. Most common themes were: cost/fees (n=127); convenience/ease of curbside recycling (n=120); keeping the program included in base service (n=110); and City responsibility (n=45).

- Policy implication: moving to voluntary service at ~$5/month is likely to reduce curbside recycling participation substantially and increase trash tonnage; keeping recycling in the base plan with a smaller, broad-based rate increase would maintain higher participation and more stable program economics (final rate should be set using the City's net annual recycling program cost).

Customers (approx.)	5,100
Responses received	1,002
Response rate	19.6%
Recycle weekly or biweekly	76.0%
Would subscribe at $5/month (voluntary)	44.9%
Would trash recyclables (no extra toter needed)	37.0%
Would use drop-off instead	12.1%
Would trash recyclables but need extra garbage toter	6.0%

1) Survey Overview

The survey collected 1,002 responses from residents/customers regarding current curbside recycling behavior, likely behavior if curbside recycling becomes a voluntary (subscription) program, and open-ended feedback. Results below reflect respondent intent and perceptions, and should be interpreted as directional (respondents may be more engaged than non-respondents).

2) Current Recycling Behavior (Question 2)

How often respondents set recycling to the curb:

Frequency	Count	Percent
Every week	479	47.8%
Every two weeks	283	28.2%
Once per month	128	12.8%
Once every two months	45	4.5%
Never – we don't recycle	67	6.7%

Interpretation:

- Nearly half of respondents (47.8%) report recycling weekly and another 28.2% recycle every two weeks.
- Only 6.7% report not recycling at all, suggesting respondents skew toward engaged households.

3) Likely Behavior if Recycling Becomes Voluntary at ~$5/month (Question 3)

What respondents say they would most likely do with recyclables if curbside recycling requires a subscription fee:

Most likely action	Count	Percent
Subscribe for curbside recycling service (estimated monthly fee: $5 per recycling toter)	450	44.9%
Trash them, but I would NOT need an additional garbage toter	371	37.0%
Use a recycling drop-off site	121	12.1%
Trash them, but likely need an extra garbage toter (estimated monthly fee: $5 per garbage toter)	60	6.0%

Key implications:

- At the stated $5/month subscription, fewer than half of respondents (44.9%) would subscribe to curbside recycling.
- A large share (43.0%) would place recyclables in the trash, with 6.0% indicating they would likely need an additional garbage toter, suggesting higher trash service demand and tonnage.
- An additional 12.1% would shift to drop-off recycling, which typically reduces convenience and may lower overall recycling capture compared with curbside collection.

4) Change-in-Behavior by Current Participation Level (Q2 × Q3)

The table below shows how intended behavior under a voluntary fee varies by current curbside set-out frequency (row percentages).

Current set-out frequency	Subscribe	Trash (no extra toter needed)	Trash (extra toter)	Drop-off recycling
Every week	55.9%	27.1%	8.8%	8.1%
Every two weeks	44.9%	39.9%	3.2%	12.0%
Once per month	35.9%	47.7%	3.1%	13.3%
Once every two months	11.1%	53.3%	6.7%	28.9%
Never - we don't recycle	6.0%	64.2%	3.0%	26.9%

Notable patterns:

- Weekly recyclers: 55.9% would subscribe, while 35.9% would trash recyclables – including 8.8% indicating they would likely need an extra garbage toter.
- Households that already do not recycle are unlikely to subscribe (only 6.0%), with most indicating they would continue trashing recyclables (67.2%).

5) Comments/Open-Ended Feedback

This briefing provides a high-level synthesis of resident comments regarding the curbside recycling program. Comments were grouped into the top thematic categories; individual comments may be reflected in more than one theme.

- **COST / TOO EXPENSIVE CONCERNS (127 COMMENTS):**
  Residents raised affordability concerns and opposed new or increased fees or taxes related to recycling.

- **CONVENIENCE / EASE OF CURBSIDE RECYCLING (120 COMMENTS):**
  Curbside recycling was widely viewed as convenient and important for maintaining participation.

- **KEEP THE PROGRAM / INCLUDE IN BASE SERVICE (110 COMMENTS):**
  Many residents supported keeping the current program unchanged and included as a basic City service.

- **CITY RESPONSIBILITY / USE OF RESOURCES (45 COMMENTS):**
  Residents expressed expectations that the City should plan for and fund recycling as a core municipal responsibility. Some communicated frustration at the City's lack of planning for capital expenses.

- **DISTRUST OR SKEPTICISM ABOUT RECYCLING OUTCOMES (38 COMMENTS):**
  Some residents questioned whether materials are actually recycled and expressed skepticism about outcomes.

- **ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS / VALUES (35 COMMENTS):**
  Comments reflected strong environmental values and support for recycling as the right thing to do.

- **COMMUNICATION & TRANSPARENCY ISSUES (25 COMMENTS):**
  Comments indicated a need for clearer communication about costs, decisions, and recycling requirements.

- **EQUITY CONCERNS (21 COMMENTS):**
  Residents highlighted potential impacts on seniors, fixed-income households, renters, and those with limited mobility.

- **WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR CURBSIDE RECYCLING (12 COMMENTS):**
  Some respondents indicated a willingness to pay for curbside recycling or expressed positive views about paying for the service.

- **OPPOSITION TO OPT-IN / SUBSCRIPTION MODEL (7 COMMENTS):**
  Some residents explicitly opposed converting recycling to an opt-in or subscription-based program.

- **OPPOSITION TO CURBSIDE RECYCLING AND/OR RECYCLING IN GENERAL (5 COMMENTS):**
  A few residents expressed skepticism about recycling in general or questioned the value of the City providing a curbside recycling program.

6) Program Options Informed by Survey Results

Based on respondent intent, the City has two primary levers: (1) keep recycling in the base service and adjust the base-plan rate to cover net costs, or (2) move to a voluntary subscription fee. Survey results suggest materially different outcomes.

Option A – Keep recycling in the base plan (recommended for maintaining participation):

- Maintains the highest participation and convenience, which supports diversion and helps avoid increased trash tonnage.

- Spreads program cost across the full customer base, reducing the per-household increase required versus an opt-in model.
- Best aligns with the strong pro-recycling values expressed in comments, while addressing cost concerns through transparent rate-setting and clear reporting.

Option B – Voluntary subscription at ~$5/month:

- Based on intent responses, curbside participation could fall toward ~44.9% subscribing, with additional residents shifting to drop-off (~12.1%) or trashing recyclables (~43.0%).
- Likely increases trash tonnage and could increase demand for additional garbage toters, which may offset some recycling cost savings through higher disposal and collection costs.
- Adds billing/administrative complexity and may raise equity concerns for fixed-income households if access depends on ability/willingness to pay.

Reasonable base-rate increase (order-of-magnitude):

Without the City's net annual recycling program cost, an exact rate increase cannot be calculated from the survey alone. However, the survey implies that a $5/month opt-in price point yields ~45% subscription interest; spreading comparable program costs across all customers typically implies a smaller, broad-based increase.

- Rate-setting formula (use actual net annual recycling program cost):
- Monthly base-rate increase = (Net annual recycling program cost) ÷ (5,100 customers × 12 months)

Illustration for intuition only: If $5/month were paid by ~44.9% of customers, the revenue-equivalent across all customers is about $2.25/month (44.9% × $5). After administrative/contamination costs, a base-plan increase in the rough range of ~$2.00-$2.50 per month per customer is a reasonable starting point to evaluate against actual program costs, based upon this example.

Appendix A – Additional Statistics

- Comment sentiment: 185 positive (36.3%), 292 neutral/mixed (57.4%), 32 negative (6.3%) among 509 comments, excluding "no comment" and illegible comments.

- Top twenty comment terms: recycling, recycle, program, curbside, trash, pay, like, more, don't, service, think, off, use, drop, city, need, landfill, what, keep, out.

Curbside Recycling Survey
Wilmington, Ohio

NOTE: This updated Curbside Recycling Survey includes clearer information. Please complete it – even if you filled out an earlier version – as previous responses have been deleted.

BACKGROUND: Wilmington's Curbside Recycling Program was launched in 2017 with grant funds that provided for the cost of a recycling truck and household collection toters. No additional fees were charged to residents as the majority of collection costs are funded through regular sanitation charges, currently set at $21.94 per month for each household.

Eight years later, the recycling truck has exceeded its life expectancy and must be replaced, an expense of more than $400,000. With no dedicated funds for the truck or other recycling expenses, the City is considering alternatives to fund this program. Your participation in this survey will assist local leaders in determining the future of curbside recycling in Wilmington.

1. What street do you live on in Wilmington? (example: W. Sugartree St.)

_____

www.co.clinton.oh.us/recycling

2. Which BEST describes how often you put your recycling container to the curb? (circle only ONE)

A. Every week
B. Every two weeks
C. Once per month
D. Once every two months
E. Never – we don't recycle
*If Never, why not? _____

3. If curbside recycling is changed to a voluntary program requiring participants to pay a monthly service fee, what would you MOST LIKELY do with your recyclables? (circle only ONE)

A. Subscribe for curbside recycling service (estimated monthly fee: $5 per recycling toter)
B. Use a recycling drop-off site
C. Trash them, but would likely need an extra garbage toter (estimated monthly fee: $5 per garbage toter)
D. Trash them, but would NOT need an additional garbage toter

4. Comments (please share your thought about curbside recycling).

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