Changing the equation: Ironwood recycling success educates advocates

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HOUGHTON - The cities of Houghton and Hancock together recycle only about 5 percent of their waste, according to a report compiled by Richelle Winkler and some of her students at Michigan Technological University.

That's far less than in other areas of the state, some of which recycle nearly 50 percent of their waste. But the Copper Country Recycling Initiative is dedicated to changing that equation, with an eventual goal of becoming a "zero-waste community," according to initiative co-chair Suzanne Van Dam.

"We're behind the curve, but the more we work, the more I've realized we can catch up," co-chair Evan McDonald said at a Thursday forum at Tech.

One focus of the forum was other U.P. communities' success stories, and one of the biggest recent successes has come from the west end of the peninsula in Ironwood and Bessemer. Those cities have contracted with Wisconsin's Eagle Waste & Recycling to provide curbside recycling and trash pickup at what Ironwood city worker and Hurontown native Bob Tervonen considers pretty reasonable rates.

Ironwood residents pay $13.74 per month for the service, he said, just 40 cents more than they'd been paying for trash pickup alone with a previous contractor. In the last 20 years, he said, the city's monthly fee has increased less than $2, despite adding recycling to what had been a trash-only system.

One way they've kept rates down while improving service, said Tervonen, is by instituting a competitive bidding process for waste removal services. Last time their contracts were up, Ironwood and Bessemer asked contractors to bid on a variety of service options. City leaders could then pick and choose those that best fit their budgets and the cities' needs.

"My advice is to let the various companies bid on everything, then ask the commission to add it up," Tervonen said.

That's particularly timely advice for Houghton and Hancock, which have been contracting all services to Waste Management for the last several years. Both cities' contracts end in 2016, said Winkler, making this the time to consider a more extensive bid process that could include curbside recycling. Currently Hancock is the only local community to offer curbside recycling, and they only pick up once a month.

Not only did the new west end contracts bring recycling opportunities to curbside, Tervonen said, they also eliminated the challenge of sorting recyclables. The area's previous recycling provider expected people to separate recyclables, he said, but now they have single-stream recycling, meaning all recyclables can be thrown in one bin. They're sorted out later at Eagle Waste's material recovery facility in Eagle River, Wisconsin.

"With other recyclers we had cardboard, plastic and glass," he said. "With Eagle it's single stream, you just dump it in."

Tervonen said Ironwood has had a few issues with rural residents bringing trash and recyclables into town for free disposal at friends' curbs, but they've been able to control the problem by limiting families to two large trash containers, with a small fee for picking up extra.

Tervonen said Ironwood had drop-off recycling for 12 years before beginning curbside pickup. While there has been a 40 cent monthly price hike, he said, residents have quickly made that
up in the time, trouble and gas money saved no longer having to bring their recyclables to the drop-offs.

"If you average it out, I feel like we're saving money with curbside," he said.