

# WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF TERRACYCLE AT THE COOP?

March 22, 2022



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*By Christopher Cox*

There are—or were, before the pandemic—three types of recycling done at the Coop. The first is the same sort of recycling members might be doing at home: aluminum cans and plastic bottles; paper and cardboard; glass and hard plastic. Most of this, generated by shoppers and staff as they go about their day, is collected regularly by the private carting company that also handles the Coop’s garbage bound for the landfill. The second involves materials used to ship food and other products to the Coop: cardboard boxes, plastic wrapping for pallets, and large plastic containers for items like olives.

Those first two recycling options were disrupted at the beginning of the pandemic but have since resumed. But the third type, the TerraCycle program, is still on hold. TerraCycle, a private recycling business based in New Jersey, was the port of last resort for Coop members who wanted to divert baby-food pouches, energy-bar wrappers, toothpaste tubes, plastic bags and other hard-to-recycle plastics from the landfill. Members could drop off these materials—as long as they came from products bought at the Coop—on special collection days, when the Environmental Committee set up tables to sort them in front of the main entrance. Everything would then be sent along to TerraCycle, which would then upcycle them into new, useful products.

The program started in 2015, with twice-monthly collections, and it was an immediate success. “We wanted to be more responsible about the waste the Coop members are generating from products purchased at the Coop,” Ann Herpel, a General Coordinator, said. Sarah Chandler, the member who came to run the TerraCycle program, claimed that the program was an important part of the Coop’s overall environmental footprint: “We are doing our part to keep soft plastic packaging out of our city’s waste stream.”

As the number of participating members grew, however, so did the costs. TerraCycle charged about \$180 per box of recycled materials, and the Environmental Committee soon had to go before the General Meeting to ask for more funding.

Eventually it became clear that the Coop needed to find a different solution. “The amount budgeted to the Environmental Committee by the General Meeting every year they were going to exceed over and over again, because we were using these boxes, which are expensive,” said Herpel. The committee soon hit upon a different way to get collected materials to New Jersey: They would forgo the boxes and instead use the Coop’s baler to put everything onto a single pallet, which a third-party trucking company would then deliver to TerraCycle. This was still expensive—Herpel estimated it cost around \$8,000 a year—but cheaper than using the company’s boxes, which was approaching \$12,000.



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Chandler and the other members of the TerraCycle squad soon faced a new problem: where to store the pallet before shipping. It would take two or sometimes three different collection dates to fill an entire pallet—which meant that it had to be stored somewhere dry where it could remain out of the way. “So we would have this pallet for a month that lived in the meeting room,” said Herpel.

This arrangement was awkward but manageable and continued until the pandemic shut down the TerraCycle program (and almost everything else). A message posted on the Coop’s website in March 2020 reads: “Check back for updates over the coming weeks. TerraCycle collections will resume as soon as we are safely and responsibly able to do so.” Two years later, TerraCycle collections have not resumed.

I asked Herpel if the cost of the program was part of the reason that it hasn’t resumed. The Coop, after all, continues to lose money because of the pandemic’s dis-

ruptions. She said that money wasn't the issue in this case: The TerraCycle program still has approved funding from the fall of 2019 that hasn't been used. "There's a budget to restart TerraCycle already," Herpel said, "but they just basically need to find the space for this pallet and actually staff the collection and schedule the collection moments."

The pallet problem isn't trivial. The meeting room space, where it once sat, has been transformed. At first, the room served as place to serve meals to the 130 temporary employees hired to operate the Coop while member labor was suspended. Now it serves as a staging room for some of the bulk processing that has moved upstairs to avoid overcrowding in the poorly ventilated basement. Herpel said there is no more space for the pallet there.

The fate of the TerraCycle program then rests, at least in part, with the Environmental Committee. If they can solve the pallet problem, they'll also have to reconstitute the workforce needed to run the collection and arrange for the shipper to take everything to New Jersey. Chandler says she's ready to get started: "I'm looking forward to supporting the staff and rebuilding the squad so that TerraCycle is available to everyone again." Members of the Environmental Committee did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The Environmental Committee's website, last updated in 2017, seems to offer some hope for the future. The committee exists, it says, to ensure that the Coop stays true to its mission to "support the best products and practices in regard to the health, safety, and preservation of humans, animals, and the overall biosphere."