

Recycling in public areas using new collection containers shows resounding success.



# Recycling *goes* public

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**R**educe, reuse, recycle — at work, at home, at play. That's the motto of the Rockford, Illinois Park District, and it captures the motivation of a number of efforts to extend recycling services beyond the walls of homes and offices. To serve this materials recovery segment, a growing list of recycling container manufacturers are designing units specifically for collection of recyclables in public areas. This article explores the unique needs of public area recycling programs and the container features that equipment companies incorporate to address those needs.

## Motivation

The move to capture recyclables in shopping and business districts, parks and sports complexes, airports and office lobbies is spurred by the desire to reinforce recycling efforts throughout the community. To be certain, the programs divert materials from disposal; a study of downtown trash in Springfield, Illinois prior to implementation of recycling throughout the business district found that 19 percent is composed of recyclables. However, the recovered quantities from many programs often are not substantial enough to justify the service on diversion alone. Additional benefits are the promotion of recycling generally and reinforcing beautification and litter control efforts. As container manufacturer Ruben Leenders of The Fibrex Group

(Chesapeake, Virginia) notes, "Public area recycling is a low-cost solution to keeping recycling on the forefront."

The majority of programs contacted for this article target cans and bottles (steel and aluminum; glass and plastic). For example, the Roger Williams Park Zoo (Providence, Rhode Island) public recycling program is aimed solely at plastic bottles, since only 20-ounce PET containers are dispensed from the zoo's vending machines. However, with this one material, the zoo recovers four tons annually. On the other end of the spectrum, the Rockford Park District captured 23 tons of material in just seven months of 2001, including glass bottles, aluminum and steel cans, plastic bottles and containers, as well as mixed paper and corrugated containers from concession stands. And, the Marin Conservation Corps, which maintains 140 recycling containers in national, state and city parks throughout Marin County, California, last year captured 95 tons of redeemable beverage containers.

## Commingling the norm

Many programs opt for commingled collection of the recyclables in order to reduce the number and cost of collection containers. Thus, it's common to find one recycling and one trash container in a unit or adjacent to one another, and programs report that the con-

tainers fill at about the same rate. Some programs offer two recycling containers, such as State University of New York at Stonybrook, which uses a three-bin system to capture mixed paper, bottles and cans, and trash.

At Clemson University (Clemson, South Carolina) recycling units allow for source separation of glass bottles, aluminum cans, plastic cups (in stadiums), PET bottles and newspapers, with additional sorts available in the units that service dormitories. The six-receptacle unit has a hinged lid that opens to reveal six 33-gallon cans.

Regardless of source separation or commingling, says Tony Long, waste management coordinator for the city of Mississauga, Ontario, the most critical factor is to locate recycling and trash receptacles adjacent to one another. People won't walk farther to find the proper recycling or garbage container.

## Not just a trash can variant

Although some programs started by simply using trash cans with recycling labels, many manufacturers now design specifically for this marketplace. Reflecting their primary customer base of recycling coordinators (be they employed by municipalities, park districts, universities or other facilities), manufacturers blend educational and operational features into their products. The importance of dif-

ferentiating recycling containers from trash cans is captured by Phil Haas of Windsor Barrel Works (Kempton, Pennsylvania) in reciting the company's early motto of "design to communicate."

Public area recycling units, whether made from steel, fiberglass or plastic lumber, often use recycled materials, and some boast 100 percent recycled content. A primary design feature is restricted openings that suggest the type of material accepted (round for bottles and cans, thin rectangular for papers). In addition to the shape, the opening should be just the right size to fit recyclables, but not so big as to allow easy trash dumping, according to Nancy DeCoursey with the city of Fontana, California. Smaller openings on the city's newest containers have kept contamination to a minimum.

Other design options keep out rain and snow by using side, rather than top slots; slanted lids; and baffled openings. Drain holes handle the moisture that does enter. These features also address a concern articulated by Mike Youdelman, recycling manager at SUNY-Stonybrook, of the need for secure lids to prevent scavenging. And, a few programs note the effectiveness of baffled openings at keeping out squirrels, raccoons and bears.

Equally important to program managers is the signage and educational content on the receptacles. Some managers compliment the use of bright container colors or large "recycle" lettering on container sides or mounting posts, which attract attention from a distance. Others, including Donna Caputo of the city of New Brunswick, New Jersey, stress the importance of icons in addition to words that instruct people, regardless of their primary language, on the proper materials to place in the recycling unit. For the public area recycling program at the Florida Capitol complex in Tallahassee, which was implemented this year in conjunction with a new, uniform office recycling program, photographic posters of accepted materials appear right above the container openings. This element was deemed essential for the changing population that traverses the capitol.

Not far behind in design considerations is the basic look. Simply put, says Bruce Buchan of container manufacturer MidPoint International (Aurora, Ontario), "People want something that looks good." Many containers are purchased in association with beautification efforts, so having a striking design is not just an afterthought.

Operational features vary by model and manufacturer. The outer surrounds of some models enclose rigid receptacles, while in others, flexible liners contain the recyclables. All programs service the units manually, most

## Toward a universal recycling receptacle

Some recycling professionals, including Daryl Young, head of the California Department of Conservation (Sacramento), have discussed the idea of developing a universal recycling receptacle or icon that people throughout North America could recognize, much like the universal identity of postal service mailboxes. Indeed, a partial step in this direction was launched in 1997 by the National Association for PET Container Resources (Charlotte, North Carolina) when it designed and distributed PETE's Big Bin for collecting iPET bottles in public areas and at events. (Ownership of the Big Bin was transferred in August to plastics productmaker Recycled Plastics Marketing of Redmond, Washington.)

Many public area program managers, however, do not sense the need for universality. For example, the village of Oak Park,

Illinois uses three different kinds of containers, reflecting choices made from 1994 to the present, when recycling programs were implemented first in the business district, then at transit stations and most recently in area parks. Coordinator Karen Rozmus says people can identify all three types of containers, so uniformity isn't as much a concern as matching the theme and landscaping of the area into which the containers will be placed.

A further complication to developing a universal container would be color. Some program managers are firm believers that blue equates to recycling and feel it is essential to have blue public area recycling containers to match the community's curbside bins. Other managers are equally fervent that green is the designated recycling hue.

commonly once a week, but with a greater frequency of several times a day in high-use areas and during special events. Lifting recyclables from the top is the mode in certain models, but as Lin King at the University of California at Davis points out, when workers service numerous units a day, ergonomic concerns drive the demand for side removal of containers. Manufacturers have responded by offering a variety of side-opening models.

A final design consideration is the ability

program, reflecting the wide reaches it serves, particularly with national parks that draw tourists unfamiliar with the local recycling programs.

Vandalism and graffiti are two other issues that arise, primarily among procurement staff. Linda Surry of McClintock Metals (Woodland, California), which is the licensed U.S. manufacturer for a container by Haul-All (Lethbridge, Alberta), notes the company uses graffiti-resistant paint that is restored easily with a mild solvent. Other manufacturers sell customers on the ease of rubbing off scratches due to the solid nature of the material or provide kits to make minor repairs. However, in practice, graffiti and vandalism do not even make a blip on the radar screen. Program managers attribute this to high-quality design, regular servicing of units and the high-traffic areas in which containers usually are located.

Public area containers not only collect recoverable materials, but also help to promote recycling overall.

### Durability, a curse and a blessing

Every program manager interviewed raved about the durability of specialty public area recycling containers. The components practically are indestructible and, other than replaceable flexible liners on some models, maintenance and replacement parts are minimal. Some 10-year-old units still are going strong.

However, the longevity of the containers isn't without drawbacks, especially since durability contributes to the relatively high cost of the units. Even when municipal and facility budgets are flush, which certainly isn't the case currently, the typical \$400 to \$1,000 per unit cost is a barrier to program implementa-

to replace decals and tops (slots) to accommodate program changes on the type of materials accepted.

### Design pays off

Repeatedly, program managers cite the benefit of all of these special design features. Programs that first used open-top, converted trash cans and now sport specialized containers notice striking improvement in recovery both in terms of quantity and quality. Interestingly, all except one program say contamination just is not an issue for them. Contamination does vex the Marin Conservation Corps pro-

tion and expansion. From New Jersey, to Illinois, to California, state grants funds have been the primary funding source for the purchase of containers. In Rhode Island, funding from a quasi-governmental agency supplemented major sponsorships from businesses and individuals for purchase of the containers at the Roger Williams Park Zoo.

### **The way is paved**

Other than the upfront costs, program managers are uniformly enthusiastic about pub-

lic area recycling. As with other types of recycling efforts, managers cite the importance of having support for the program at all levels of an agency (from decisionmakers to custodial staff). Most managers are so enthusiastic about the success of their programs that the only change they'd like to see is expansion. Despite the vagaries of grant funding, the strength of commitment and references from existing customers lead to this recycling niche being a positively "steady market," says Stephanie MacMillan of Busch Systems Inter-

national (Barrie, Ontario), an assessment shared by many of her colleagues in the container manufacturing industry. **RR**

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For details on public area recycling containers, circle 851 on the reader service card, located between pages 8 and 9.

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