

Recycling efforts on the rise



Sander Sanitation driver John Koke uses a touch book GPS to record data throughout his route. As Koke makes a stop, the touch book displays Koke's location. He will select the address and enter the amount of recyclable material collected at the home. - News-Record photo by Joy Lewis

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Before they throw those aluminum cans into the trash bin, more people in Gillette are stopping to search for a recycling bin, and they're shrinking the amount of trash at home by participating in the city's blue bag recycling program.

The number of blue bag recyclers climbed 24.7 percent from February to June.

The city's new event recycling program accumulated about two tons of recyclables from the Donkey Creek Festival, the Wally Byam Caravan Club International Airstream rally and the Fourth of July.

Here's a look at the recycling increase:

Blue bag program

In February, the city altered its curbside collection program for recycling. It required participants to register for the program to make it more efficient.

"It's so we know where we are (with participation). It's just for data. There's no fee for recycling," said Michael Foote, the city's sustainability coordinator.

The data from registration is uploaded in the city's new software for the program, which has saved some 40 to 50 hours that city employees would spend manually inputting data.

Registration will allow for better tracking of the program. Pickup crews won't have to drive every street in the city looking for blue bags if people register their address with the city.

The data will be used in the future if or when the city decides to make changes to its recycling program.

"The hope is hard data (will be available) to back up change," Foote said.

Since registration began, the number of participants jumped almost 25 percent. And that increase doesn't include the drop-off trailers for blue bags around town.

New participants still can register by calling the city at 686-5206.

Event recycling

For about \$8,000, the city bought 160 recycling stands, which hold a clear plastic bag held down by a big blue plastic lid with three small openings for recyclables.

Cam-plex has 100 of the stands on loan for recycling during events. The facility has recycled at events before, but not with individual stands for people to put recyclables in, General Manager Dan Barks said.

At the Fourth of July, the city collected 260 pounds of recyclables, mostly aluminum cans. At the Airstream RV rally, it collected more than 3,500 pounds of plastic bottles, cans, cardboard and paper.

The new stands visually stand out because people can see the recyclables in the clear bag. That and awareness has resulted in

making event recycling a success, Foote said.

The new event recycling has taken some detailed planning and dedication to see it through. There has to be a designated location to store full recyclable bags and pickup plan.

"You don't just step into this," Foote said.

The main obstacles are stopping people from putting recyclables into trash bins and putting trash into recycling bins.

Surprisingly, at all three events, there weren't any problems with contamination, Foote said.

"We know we're not going to get 100 percent," he said.

But if the city can get 50 or even 75 percent of the recyclables recycled, it's worth it.

"Some folks still have a mindset to throw it away. I would rather see in the trash can than on the ground," he added.

Airstreamers received free curbside collection for blue bags. The same will be provided for rodeo guests staying in one of the Cam-plex RV parks.

Walmart provided blue bags for the Airstream rally and the rodeo.

Barks hopes event recycling will become a permanent feature at major events.

The next events the recycling stands will appear at are the National High School Finals Rodeo and the community picnic. A compactor for cardboard also will be on hand.

"It's one of those learning things. It's one event at a time," Foote said.

The future

There are a variety of things Foote is looking into to boost Gillette's recycling in the future.

Some changes are small, like replacing the Styrofoam plates at the community picnic with paper plates this summer.

"There are some things we're looking at in terms of long-term planning," he said. "On my radar is what materials can we add."

Cooperation with the county is vital to any changes in the recycling program since the city just runs the collection and the county processes it from there.

In the future, Foote would like to see pasteboard recycled along with more plastics, like No. 1 through No. 7.

Glass still is being crushed and used as a daily cover over the landfill instead of being shipped to a facility for recycling. But in order to take more materials, it has to have a buyer.

"The key is having the markets to send them to. Right now we don't," he said.

Blue bags by the numbers

February: 2,178 participants

March: 2,257

April: 2,309

May: 2,325

June: 2,713

Recycling roundup at Cam-plex

Look for the blue top recycling containers next to trash bins at the National High School Finals Rodeo.

The containers will be near entrances, exits, restrooms, concession areas, rodeo arenas, trade fair and other facilities.