

# Recycling is popular, but is it profitable?

By Jodi Rogstad  
[jrogstad@wyomingnews.com](mailto:jrogstad@wyomingnews.com)



Supervisor Mike Kenworthy pulls paper out of a truck at the Magic City Enterprises facility Friday afternoon in Cheyenne. Michael Smith/staff

CHEYENNE -- Sometimes people are wrong about what they can toss into local recycling bins.

At Magic City Enterprises -- the firm that processes and sells the city's recyclables from the drop-off bins -- workers pull a wide array of strange objects from the piles of cardboard, paper and tin cans. Since they can't recycle it, the stuff decorates the walls and forklifts.

To name a few: a mechanical toy parrot, a stuffed gorilla, a boogie board, a bicycle helmet, colored plastic rings from a baby toy, a "Beware of Dog" sign, a guitar-shaped controller for the video game "Guitar Hero."

But these stray items are dwarfed by the 12-foot-high piles of cardboard and paper in storage at the facility off Missile Drive.

Generally, Magic City's buyers use the cardboard to turn it into, well, more cardboard. Paper mills frequently buy the paper as do insulation companies.

Cardboard and paper are the two big money-makers in recycling, said Michael "Mac" McCracken, assistant general manager at Magic City.

But not this winter.

Last summer cardboard fetched \$130 per ton. Now it's a negative \$15.

But McCracken did find a buyer in Utah that would take it for around \$35 a ton because Magic City's cardboard is clean, and the firm likes the agency's mission of helping people with developmental disabilities.

McCracken expects the market to recover after Chinese New Year today. China has the biggest demand for cardboard, and he believes they have a lot more influence over the market than people think.

"China has to pay off the Olympics," McCracken said. "They want the market to go down."

At the same time, recycling has become so popular here that Magic City can't keep up with the piles of paper and cardboard. It's a problem they hope to alleviate with a new bailer that is coming in March.

The city of Cheyenne contracts with Magic City to handle the cardboard boxes, newspapers and cans that people toss into the blue bins at several big-box locations around the city. Magic City also has other clients, such as F.E. Warren Air Force Base.

When the market is healthy, the city gets a cut of the profits, said Dennis Pino, the city's sanitation director. Magic City puts the rest into its program.

"When times are bad (though), we have to subsidize," Pino said.

The market for recycling is volatile. That means when the city implements curbside, or single-stream, recycling by the end of 2010, taxpayers will have to subsidize.

Already, \$150,000 a year goes into the recycling fund. When curbside recycling goes online, all sanitation customers will pay \$2 a month, whether they participate or not.

Pino says it's more an ethical question than a fiscal one: Is it better to lose trees while saving money?

"If you're going to look at the dollar all the time, it's probably not worth it," Pino said. "But by recycling, we're not having to mine more products and cut down more trees to get to that point.

"No matter what, you have to recycle because your environment will suffer for it."

According to figures from the city, Cheyenne earned \$51,786.45 between June and December -- the first half of the fiscal year. For the same period last year, the city got \$13,570.

This year's stronger figures reflect last summer's bull recycling market, Pino said: "We couldn't keep our hands on cardboard and newspaper."

The plus side of recycling is it lightens the loads of trash that are shipped to Ault, Colo. This spring, the City Council approved a contract with the North Weld Sanitary Landfill to ship the city's trash there for \$395 a load.

Residents in Sun Valley on the city's east side already have curbside recycling as part of a pilot program. Pino estimates these residents are recycling 30 percent of their garbage. Some are so gung-ho, they're hitting 90 percent.

The city's Happy Jack landfill is about four years from reaching capacity.

Built in 1966, it lies within a mile of wells that provide 10 percent of the city's water. Officials want to put off a \$40 million landfill at the Belvoir Ranch, southwest of the city, as long as possible.