

# Yard waste program considered a 'failure' because of garbage in the mix

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Published: Monday, December 14, 2009 12:30 PM MST

After years of residents' misuse, city officials have deemed the yard waste program a failure.

Beer bottles, baby diapers, paper, dog feces and food remains are some of trash left in the city's yard waste bins every week during the summer, despite the fact that directions are clearly outlined on the front of the bins.

Yard waste containers have turned into a secondary garbage service, and people's negligence is keeping yard waste from being recycled.

## How it started

Gillette's yard waste program started in 1995 with about six bins and the hope to turn people's yard waste into compost, thereby keeping it out of the landfill and reducing dumping costs.

"It started as a way to reduce the overall cost for the city and the residents," City Administrator Mike Muirhead said.

The idea was simple: Take people's yard waste and separate it out from regular municipal garbage. Separating it eliminated the \$60-a-ton tipping fee the county charges the city for dumping garbage in its landfill, and it allows the waste to be processed into compost, which saves the landfill precious room. It pays to recycle yard waste into compost because the city, county and taxpayers will bear the financial burden of a new landfill.

"In the end, it makes perfect sense," Muirhead said.

But it only works if everybody followed the rules, and they haven't. Negligence by some is jeopardizing the program for others.

Last summer, city crews installed metal grating on the top of the bins to keep garbage out.

But even that didn't stop abuse. Some of the gratings were sawed off and damaged so that people could shove tree limbs and garbage into them, Muirhead said.

He called the program a failure.

"Citizens just took huge advantages (of it)," Muirhead said. "It's not cost-effective."

In 2004, the city spent \$56,000 to operate the yard waste collection. City spokesman Joe Lunne didn't know an estimated total of how much money the city has put into the program.

The city collected more than 604 tons of yard waste this year. Mark Swan, environmental services manager for Campbell County, said that most of that yard waste had to be dumped in the landfill instead of composted because almost all of it was contaminated.

## Bad apples ruin program

Kristi Stroschein saved her yard waste for the city's containers because she thought she was doing some good because it was being turned into compost.

"That was the point. We thought it was being recycled not just sitting in the dump," she said.

The same goes for Kent Levi, a regular yard-waste bin user. It doesn't surprise him that a few people are ruining a popular program for everyone.

Councilman Everett Boss believes most people follow the rules, but those few bad apples are ruining it for everyone else.

"We've tried to get the message out," Councilwoman Louise Carter-King said. Now, "we're defeating our purpose."

Free yard waste dumping at the county landfill has been offered for years.

"It's been successful when people bring it in," Swan said.

The fear is that yard waste will be found littered throughout the city and county in ditches and parks if the landfill didn't offer free dumping. Or worse yet, the yard waste could just end up in the garbage, going right back into the landfill.

## Failed attempts

Today, the city has more than 150 yard waste containers, and almost all of those bins' waste is contaminated by the time it reaches the landfill, Swan said. If a bin is contaminated, the entire batch of yard waste is ruined and it's dumped into the landfill like all the other garbage, hogging valuable space.

In the past, county workers tried to separate out the garbage from the city's yard waste bins but workers were getting cut by beer bottles and other glass. It was just too dangerous, Swan said.

"That's a terrible excuse," Councilman Tom Murphy Jr. said.

He has hard time believing that most bin waste is contaminated.

Several years ago, the City Council discovered that the yard waste wasn't being composted because of trash in the bins. But the city kept it going. "It was an effort to show or tell the county it could be done," Murphy said.

If the county was having problems with the city's yard waste collection being ruined with garbage, it should have brought it up years ago to work out a solution, he said.

"Give us some parameters," Murphy said. "Tell us what the rules are and we'll abide by them."

The council is rethinking the program and will discuss it this winter. The city is dissecting every option to find a solution, Muirhead said.

"People still need a place to haul that," he said.

One thing is clear, though. Something needs to be done.

"We're filling up our landfill at an unprecedented rate," Boss said.

TOMORROW: City officials examine options for dealing with yard waste.

#### YARD WASTE TONS COLLECTED IN 2009

April: 45.61

May: 103

June: 196

July: 108.02

August: 60.48

September: 25.36

October: 39.22

November: 27.23