

# Organics push takes recycling beyond bottles, cans and paper

A company that's provided curbside pickup of organic waste in Wayzata now offers service for businesses in Hennepin County.

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Jim Wollschlager sees the contents of a garbage can differently than most.

Where many see just a heap of apple cores, coffee grounds and soiled hand towels, he sees the potential for dollar signs and a cleaner environment.

As the director of company operations for Randy's Sanitation, Wollschlager is one of the driving forces behind a multi-pronged effort to turn Hennepin County's organic waste into an eco-friendly initiative.

For years, Randy's has quietly offered curbside pickup of organic waste to residents in Wayzata, where it is the citywide waste-removal provider. About 4,000 households there regularly dump food scraps and paper products into separate bins to avoid the cost of larger garbage containers and more frequent trash pickups.

Now, businesses are getting in on the act.

Randy's began offering the service to companies about a year ago, when John Jaimez of Hennepin County Environmental Services contacted the company looking for a hauler to expand the county's organic waste removal program.

Businesses want the service because it saves money and comes with the bonus of doing the right thing environmentally, Jaimez said.

It was just a matter of finding a removal provider that would put forth the resources to make it happen, said Jaimez.

While he met with every hauler in the county to try to build interest, some companies were reluctant to enter a market that doesn't yet have the proof of profitability.

But Wollschlager, who's on the board of the Recycling Association of Minnesota, has Randy's looking at it from a different angle: the future.

To date, the company has purchased four fuel-efficient trucks specifically for organic waste removal. "If it's something that is going to take off, you might as well be on board from the beginning," he said.

And with big players such as Best Buy and Ikea on board as customers -- as well as smaller ones like Corner Table restaurant in South Minneapolis -- Randy's is on the brink of making commercial organic pickup profitable.

It has close to 40 commercial customers, and about five more business are signing up every week, Wollschlager said. If the company stays on that pace, it soon could break even.

The service picks up about 10 tons of organic waste each week and trucks it to Resource Recovery Technologies in Empire Township, where it is composted and used for road construction and landscaping. In other counties, that type of waste is sent to methane-producing landfills or carbon dioxide-emitting incinerators.

The rise of the program has Hennepin County excited as it strives to get back to its statutory goal of recycling 50 percent of all waste. It has fallen short of that goal the past

several years and drawn unwanted attention as the greatest waste-producing county in the state.

Organic waste removal is perhaps the best way to make up for the county's recycling shortcomings, and one of the last outlets it had not tried, Jaimez said. Tapping into the 25 percent of all trash that is organic could put the county well over its goal. An incentive to get more companies involved: Half of the county's 500,000 yearly tons of waste comes from businesses.

"I'm amazed at how rapidly the interest is growing," Jaimez said. "People want it."

In restaurants, it's estimated that at least 80 percent of trash is compostable.

Corner Table owner Scott Pampuch has reduced his waste bill by nearly 50 percent by recycling about 95 percent of his waste. The amount of garbage he throws away has been reduced to the size of a regular residential garbage bin.

"At some point, we all got in the habit of throwing trash away. Now we just have to get in the habit of throwing it away correctly," Pampuch said.

Erik Borg is a University of Minnesota journalism student on temporary assignment with the Star Tribune.