

SUSTAINABILITY TALKS

How Landfills are Investing in Reuse Models



Arlene Karidis | Jul 13, 2023

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Can you imagine businesses dedicated to zero-waste-to-landfill and disposal site operators teaming up as partners? Wouldn't the reuse and waste industries be competing for the same discards?

That's not how Hillsborough County, Florida's solid waste department and neighbor, Goodwill-Suncoast, see it. Together they intercept would-be-trash and find useful second lives for it.

The relationship hatched shortly after Hillsborough County noticed a pile-up of bikes at its sites. They had belonged to empty nesters whose kids left them behind, people who were moving and felt it would be a hassle to pack and lug them, or people who didn't want them anymore.

The solid waste department began donating the bikes to a county agency that gave them to kids – those in foster care or who could benefit from structure and activities to fill their days.

“Then we realized we were seeing more than bikes in good condition and usable. So, we contacted Goodwill to see if they could take all these materials to sell in their stores,” says Danny Gallagher, recycling coordinator, Hillsborough County Solid Waste.

A Goodwill trailer now resides at one of its drop-off sites, and Hillsborough provided a bathroom, break room, and outlets so Goodwill staff could charge their mobile phones. The nonprofit does most of the work from there, taking in, inspecting, and transporting recovered finds to their warehouse.

The community was already coming to these sites with their trash. Each household gets 10 cubic yards of free waste disposal a year. Now while they stop in, they can also donate what's reusable while saving points to apply to what must be disposed of.

Goodwill and the county first agreed to a one-year pilot with the option to renew and have already extended one year because the new venture is working well. Plans are underway for a second site.

Over 45,000 pounds of materials have been diverted since the program launch in September 2022 —that's with a couple of timeouts—the trailer doors closed first for Hurricane Ian and then for Tropical Storm Nicole.

“Florida has a 75 percent recycling goal, so we are all about what we can do to help alleviate waste,” Gallagher says.

All donations would otherwise be landfilled or burned at the county’s waste-to-energy facility, which is 40 years old and has been plodding along at capacity for years.

“We are growing fast, so a program like this while small is mighty, and it helps,” Gallagher says.

Goodwill operates during the same hours as the collection center, so customers have a convenient one-stop shop for donations, trash, and recyclables. Some residents have said they come in solely to leave off their perfectly usable belongings they no longer want to ensure they find another home. They see the site as a donation center.

County staff make a quick assessment on whether incoming material is suitable for sale, which helps Goodwill with a long-standing problem: a barrage of unsellable stuff is left at their door, whether by intentional illegal dumpers or well-intended folks who, like wish-cyclers, unknowingly “wish-donate.”

Historically the nonprofit has received paints, insecticides, shattered mirrors, and broken appliances they can’t move. Some people leave discards after hours, tossed in paper boxes and or uncovered, that get soaked in rain and rendered unusable. Goodwill has to haul those loads to the landfill, and it’s labor, fuel, and time.

While the charity avoids such headaches and potential liability from contamination, Hillsborough benefits too.

“This is a no-cost program. It saves landfill capacity and gets material out of our system. We do not have to handle it ourselves. It does not take up space in garbage trucks. And reuse has incalculable environmental benefits, even over recycling,” Gallagher says.

Goodwill does what it can to avoid landfilling, with multiple touchpoints to keep material in circulation even after its storefronts. The Hillsborough program offers one more option, says Drew Przybyszewski, director of marketing and public relations at Goodwill Suncoast.

“It’s amazing what is being brought in,” he says.

Through this partnership the region’s stores have landed clothes, books, housewares, even a few oak picture frames in matting and the original plastic wrap that likely would otherwise get dumped.

“When the idea was pitched, we did due diligence to determine if the model would work. What donations are coming in? Are they worth anything? Can we at least break even? And we found we could. The donation numbers are going up, and the quality of donations is there,” Przybyszewski says.

While he and Gallagher see the symbiotic relationship as a no-brainer, Waste360 could only find a few similar programs through a Google search and outreach to waste pros.

In Carroll County Maryland, Northern Landfill partners with the Habitat for Humanity ReStore. County residents bring reusable building materials to the landfill—tools, banisters, cabinets, cinderblocks, bricks, flooring, hardware, lights/lamps, among other salvageables.

Northern Landfill also takes books, CDs, DVDs, and video games that a for-profit company, Discover Books, resells, donates, and or recycles.

Along California’s Bay region, ReGen Monterey, a publicly owned recycling and waste management operation, got into a similar but more complex relationship, which has changed over the years to stay alive.

ReGen launched, owned, and operated a reuse store, Last Chance Mercantile, in the 90s.

It was a great concept, as reuse aligned with the special waste district’s resource management strategy, says Zoe Shoats, director of Communications, ReGen Monterey.

But the district spent about \$600,000 a year to run the store. It was in the red for years; COVID brought more financial hits.

ReGen has since turned operations over to the Veterans Transition Center of California, a nonprofit that continues to run the store on the waste and recycling operation's campus, rent-free. ReGen still supplies inventory.

"We had to balance environmental stewardship while thinking about the ratepayers, ensuring we can provide affordable services," Shoats says.

"We needed to find someone else to carry it on operationally. But we understood the value of reuse for our community and the value we could offer in the endeavor as a waste management facility."

Now the project has a second purpose; beyond recovering resources, it helps to employ struggling veterans on the way to self-sufficiency.

ReGen developed the idea based on what another California operation, Urban Ore, was doing. The group started at the Berkeley City-owned landfill as a bootstrap operation, scavenging on tipping floors, with the city providing access to scrap metals and other reusable goods and rent-free space for its store.

Urban Ore has since grown exponentially and relocated. But over the years, the Alameda County Recycling Board and the City of Berkeley have continued supporting the operation so it could carry on its community service.

Gallagher anticipates that more municipalities will set up reuse stores and swap shops. Gone are the days when they landfill and now even recycling is only one puzzle piece.

"Recycling is not enough; it won't save us from the consequences of our waste generation habits. This is another service opportunity and a great way to show we are not just sitting on our hands as a county. We are constantly reevaluating how we can save money and still do the right thing for the environment."