

Tampa's talking solar trash bins

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They don't spill, don't stink and can hold up to 180 gallons of trash compacted into a brick, nearly five times more than a regular garbage can.

It's the latest technology in solid waste disposal: solar-powered self-compacting trash cans. The new garbage receptacles soon could sprout up in neighborhoods throughout the city.

Tampa officials are weighing a proposal from Waste Management Inc. of Florida to place nearly 100 solar-powered receptacles in sections of Davis Islands, Ben T. Davis Beach and Ybor City, replacing the city's old-fashioned, 32-gallon curbside trash cans in those areas.

Under a pilot project being discussed by city officials, Tampa would lease the eco-friendly compactors from the company for a cost-benefit analysis.

"We're still reviewing the proposal," said Tonja Brickhouse, director of Tampa's Department of Solid Waste & Environmental Program Management. "The biggest issue is funding."

The bins, which resemble a large green mailbox, are expected to cut labor and fuel costs while reducing carbon dioxide emissions, said Bryant Johnson, Waste Management's manager of community and municipal relations.

"Instead of city workers emptying the bins several times a week, they're only coming by once or twice a week," he said. "That will result in a substantial savings for the city."

The company's proposal estimates that replacing the old bins with solar compactors would save the city nearly \$200,000 a year and reduce emissions of carbon dioxide - the primary gas linked to global warming - by more than 100 tons a year.

The city would pay about \$83,000 a year to lease the bins, according to the proposal.

Because the compactors hold more trash, they require less servicing, and that means less carbon emissions from city trucks emptying bins, Johnson said.

How does it work?

The device is powered by a solar panel on top that recharges a 12-volt battery. Once trash reaches the level of an electric beam near the top, it triggers a ram that compacts the garbage until it reaches maximum volume.

One of the more whiz-bang aspects of the technology is that it sends an e-mail to the operator when it's ready to be emptied.

When they get the e-mail, city workers come by to remove the compacted trash bricks instead manhandling the messy contents of an overflowing can or emptying giant trash bins.

The trash receptacles can be equipped with a 60-gallon recycling bin.

The technology emerged several years ago, and solar compactors can be found on street corners, in parks and elsewhere in cities including Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and New York. They also are being used in many state and national parks.

The compactors are in Canada, Australia, Israel and France.

Still, the high-tech gadgets don't come cheaply. They range in price from \$3,195 to \$3,995 each. Most cities try to get state and federal grant money to cover the costs.

Tampa is not at the stage of exploring financing possibilities.

Grants are how Philadelphia, which faces a \$1.4 billion, five-year budget deficit, replaced 700 trash bins in its high-traffic downtown with 500 of the solar compactors.

Boston got its first solar-powered compactors in 2006 and now has more than 160, using them everywhere from Faneuil Hall to Fenway Park, home of the Red Sox.

"People really love them," said Dot Joyce, a spokeswoman for Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino. "They're very efficient, good for the environment and save us a lot of money."