

TALKIN' TRASH

GALVESTON'S ECO-CENTER AND RECYCLING PROGRAM

BY MARIA ADOLPHS



Rubbish, refuse, debris, detritus, waste, litter, junk, garbage. Whatever it is called, everyone produces it and most do not give it much thought once it is tossed in the trash. But Paul Booth does. He thinks about it all the time. It is his life (or a big part of it), and he is concerned about the future.

As the Assistant Director of Public Works for the City of Galveston, Paul Booth is a trash guy, or head of all the other trash guys. With a cleanly shaven head and a tidy, close crop beard, you can tell he is a man that spends a lot of time outdoors engaged in his responsibilities of overseeing the recycling program on Galveston Island, including the Eco-Center at 702 61st Street which has experienced a quiet transformation.

Booth has worked in public works for eight years, but has been in his current position for just over a year now. He has implemented and overseen many of the changes at the Eco-Center, and is eager to talk about what else is in the works for Galveston.

At one time, three overflowing bins stood in the middle of a gravel lot with weeds poking through discarded tires and rusted appliances; debris was plastered to the chain-link fence or swirled around in the wind—eventually making its way to the streets or bodies of water that surround the island.

Now the facility features two drive-through lanes with workers ready to assist. Many more secure shipping container bins have replaced the old ones. There is a place for everything: paper, plastic, metal, cardboard, Styrofoam.

Outdated big screen televisions and other e-waste are stacked neatly. Free mulch is up for grabs. There is even a new glass crusher. A sense of order and efficiency replaces the past dumping ground.

After Hurricane Ike in 2008, the site was expanded and improved. Most Galveston residents can recall for months after Ike hit the island, the continuous rumble of tractors as rubble from splintered homes, businesses, docks, upturned boats, and other unidentifiable items were formed into great mountains reaching 20-30 feet

high, awaiting passage off the island. The tons of garbage could not be ignored and in essence, Ike acted as a catalyst for revving up recycling efforts in Galveston.

"The availability of new technology, opportunities in the marketplace, community needs and funding allowed the Eco-Center to become a full service center, offering drive up assistance and the ability to accept more items," Booth explains.

The Eco-Center even accepts Styrofoam, which Booth proudly says is "very unique to the area, even [nearby] Houston doesn't accept it at all recycling centers." He could not hide his excitement if he wanted to as he breathlessly describes the process of Styrofoam recycling. The Eco-Center now has a special machine that shreds, melts, and sucks the air out of the Styrofoam, spitting out long coils of the compressed material, which can then be sold to plastic vendors.

With the exception of tires, all materials that are collected are sold to vendors, who further process it, and then sell it as raw material. "This raw material can then be turned into a number of objects: the



plastic is melted down and remade into new bottles and containers, aluminum cans become aluminum cans again, scrap metal can be made into anything from cars to a pair of scissors, paper and cardboard are turned back into more paper and cardboard, and glass is made into beer bottles and other containers."

Booth says the more material that is collected, the better the opportunity for the city to reach a break-even point (they are currently operating at a 30% loss annually). "It is time to consider what these materials are—a commodity... the city could eventually foresee profits from recycling."

In a more pensive tone, Booth says, "Even more important, is keeping these items out of the landfills."

Booth shares just how much material Galveston is able to divert from the landfills. He clicks away at his computer keys and quickly pulls up the numbers: In 2012-2013, they collected 2000 tons, which equates to 25,000 cubic yards that does not end up in landfills, in 2013-2014, those numbers increased to 2500 tons and 27,000 cubic feet diverted, and this year the recycling program is projected to exceed those numbers.

The Eco-Center has approximately 8000 visitors per month—which sounds initially impressive, but wanes when considering the population of Galveston is just under 49,000. Booth, in a lively yet unwavering manner offers tips to make recycling easier.

"The first thing to do is set an area aside designated for recycling—this could be as simple as a few bins in the garage or yard, and instead of throwing items... directly in the trash, place them in the designated bins. Next, incorporate a trip to the Eco-Center in your daily activities and errands. Because the Eco-Center is centrally located and has self-service hours as well, it is possible to drop off the recycling twenty-four hours a day on your way to go shopping or doing other things."

He also tries to make recycling fun. In conjunction with the AIA Sandcastle Competition, Booth organized an



NEW! The ECO Center will now accept recyclable items 24/7
- please place items in the appropriate bins. Brush and brown materials not accepted after 4:30 PM Monday through Saturday. Please note staff is only available to assist during regular operating hours. **Free mulch is available at the ECO Center, 702 61st Street.**

702 61st Street • Galveston, TX 77551
Monday - Saturday 8 a.m. - 4:45 p.m. • Closed on Sunday

attempt at setting a Guinness World Record for collecting the most aluminum cans in an eight hour period. They did not break the record (152,800), but it did show how community efforts can make a big impact in increasing recycling. Booth also fervently dispels the myth that recycling will not make much of a difference.

"I challenge all Galveston residents to try recycling for one week and they will be amazed at the reduction of trash that would normally make its way to the over-flowing landfills. The 98 gallon capacity trash bins used to collect trash can easily be reduced to half, even one-third."

When asked if Galveston will ever have curbside recycling, Booth says the city currently offers home collection for the elderly and disabled, as well as partnerships with local schools to collect recyclable material, and is working on a plan to offer the service to all Galveston residents and businesses, but the main obstacle is a matter of economics. "The proposed project will require a five million dollar capital investment." Until then, Booth adds, "the City will add three additional self-service locations, thanks to a recent grant."

In addition to the Eco-center at 61st, there is currently a drop off site at Lindale Park near UTMB. The city will soon add three additional satellite locations. Proposed locations are: On Broadway at the Galveston Historical Foundation, The Sandhill Crane Soccer fields, and either the McGuire Dent Recreation Center at 28th and Seawall or the Wright Cuney Recreation Center at 41st street.

They also are expanding their efforts to collect more materials in entertainment districts such as The Strand-downtown, and Seawall, where parades, festivals and events generate a lot of glass bottles. Booth, almost giddy, also describes plans to compost food waste in the future.

Talking to Booth, it is obvious how crucial recycling is. "Recycling is tremendously important for our environmental impact—it keeps the beaches and bays free of debris for wildlife and for people to enjoy. The more we recycle the less dependence we have on petroleum products, which in turn puts fewer pollutants in the air and water." A surprisingly enlightened stance in big-oil Texas.

"Bottom line, if we don't do something drastic in the way we deal with refuse in the US, within 20 years there will be no space left in the landfills. My grandchildren won't have a place to dispose of trash, so it is up to us, right now to help educate everyone to turn it around. Galveston is on the right track, and recycling is a huge part of it."

