

Recycling efforts to expand

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After being dismissed for years as too big for Delaware's recycling needs, industrial-scale sorting centers for cans, bottles and other wastes are now under study at two locations in Wilmington, with one ready to open in Southbridge.

Blue River Resources LLC founder Herb Northrop said Friday that his company already has equipped a former tire recycling center on South Heald Street to take in recyclable materials -- including bulk paper and loads from mixed-waste curbside pickup programs -- for sorting, baling and shipment.

The Delaware Solid Waste Authority, meanwhile, is scheduled to consider four proposals next week for operation of a sorting center at the Delaware Recycling Center.

"Getting a facility up and operating successfully when the economy is going so terribly probably bodes well for the future," said Richard Fleming, a former member of the Recycling Public Advisory Council and a Delaware Nature Society member.

Blue River still needs a permit from the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control to open its business, but already is collecting pre-separated materials under a separate state license. That approval, which caps on-site stockpiles at 5,000 tons, was granted in June, just as the first, single-family-home phase of Delaware's mandatory curbside recycling program was taking full effect.

The law, enacted in mid-2010, requires haulers to provide recycling pickups if they also collect trash. Legislators agreed to give haulers more time to arrange service for multifamily homes and businesses, although curbside recycling must be available at all sites by 2014, assuring a steady flow of residential recyclables into the local market.

"I was committed to this regardless of that legislation," Northrop said. "The need was there. All that the legislation does is enhance the opportunity. This was long overdue."

As many as 30-35 people will work at the Southbridge site per shift at peak times, with the possibility of a second shift depending on demand.

Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control Secretary Collin P. O'Mara said that Markell administration officials are pleased with the private-sector interest.

"I think that it shows two things: First, it shows the economics of recycling are profitable, the investments make sense," O'Mara said. "It also shows the importance of having the recycling law in place. There will be sustainable volumes. They can have confidence that there will be enough recyclable material at the curbside to allow a profit."

The centers

Northrop was one of the founders of Blue Mountain Recycling, which began as a bulk sorting business in the Philadelphia area and is now owned by Vermont-based Casella Waste systems. He said the Wilmington site will likely grow to about 1,000 tons per week, although the company's permit application cites a potential for

4,500 tons per week or 234,000 tons a year -- an amount equal to nearly half the total waste landfilled in New Castle County yearly.

No actual landfill-bound wastes of any kind will be processed in Southbridge, Northrop said. All arriving materials will be intended for transfer to other uses.

Michael Parkowski, a DSWA administrator who oversees recycling programs, said DSWA alone collected about 53,000 tons of recyclables through all programs last year, up dramatically from just a few years ago, but still short of the state's goal of recycling 50 percent of all municipal waste by 2015.

Other recycling brought the total to more than 175,000 tons of residential waste alone, or about 34 percent.

DSWA sought proposals for recycling programs or other activities at Pigeon Point earlier this year, hoping in part to attract a major green industry, such as a wind-turbine assembler. Five proposals were submitted, including four for a sorting facility and a fifth for construction and demolition waste recycling.

"The idea is, we have this unique piece of property that we wanted to utilize," Parkowski said. "We wanted to make it not just a recycling facility, but a whole green technology type of facility."

Parkowski said that DSWA would not comment on Blue River's private venture or on the potential for competition.

Demand up

Paper and plastic and metal recycling factory demand has recovered from recession levels just a few years ago, Parkowski said, when DSWA was forced to pay sorting companies outside the state to take the materials collected from its Recycle Delaware drop-off centers and curbside programs. The agency recently reported receiving as much as \$45 per ton for paper and plastic.

"We're getting positive revenues for the material we're selling, and that's good news," Parkowski said, adding that DSWA continues to lose money overall on recycling expenses, after accounting for disposal of hazardous household wastes, electronic goods and other harder-to-manage materials.

Northrop said Blue River had invested millions in cleaning up and equipping the Southbridge site, although he did not provide an exact figure. Permit application documents indicate that the business could take deliveries from as far as 50 miles away, extending its reach to nearby areas of Pennsylvania, Maryland and New Jersey.

At full capacity, as many as five to eight trucks could arrive hourly at the plant, which is expected to operate six days per week. Most of the processing at the 8-acre site will take place inside a refurbished, 70,000-square-foot building. Magnets, screens, blowers and electrical and optical sorters are among the equipment likely to be used, along with heavy lifts and large bundle bailers.

Blue River's investors also include Brian Schaffer, a founder of the Peninsula Compost food-waste recycling business along Christiana Avenue.

O'Mara said a cluster of recycling industries has sprung up around and near south Wilmington in addition to recyclable sorting and composting. Carpet, plastic, yard waste, construction and demolition waste and paper product business all have taken root.

"In a small area, we'll have private-sector businesses that are able to handle every aspect of the waste stream," O'Mara said.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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