

Mix of external, internal motives drives construction recycling

By: Alex Zank, alex.zank@dailyreporter.com January 14, 2016 2:37 pm

When it comes to recycling construction materials, the color green can have a double significance. Along with its usual association with solicitude for the environment, it can stand for cold, hard cash.

Milwaukee officials learned that lesson when, in 2010, they began recycling asphalt shingles to turn into hot-mix asphalt.

"Prior to that (the shingles were) just going into the garbage with anything else," said Rick Meyers, resource recovery program manager at the city's Department of Public Works.

Meyers said city officials were looking for ways to dispose of less trash. When they discovered that recycling asphalt shingles would cost the city less than shipping them to a landfill, the choice became "a no-brainer," he said.

Of course, not every decision about recycling is so easy.

Jason Salisbury, president of the Appleton-based waste-management service Landfill Reduction & Recycling Inc., said contractors are generally influenced by three considerations when deciding whether they should recycle: whether it's cheaper to dispose of waste in a landfill, whether there is a strong demand for recycled materials and whether government regulations are helpful or prohibitive.

Some combination of those factors most likely explains, Salisbury said, why Wisconsin companies recycle less than their counterparts in neighboring states such as Illinois and Minnesota. That's not to say, though, that things aren't getting better, Salisbury said.

Wisconsin, when measured by the amount of waste it recycles rather than sends to a landfill, is catching up, he said.

Still, one big obstacle the state must contend with is the relatively low cost of disposing of trash in a Wisconsin landfill.

"Low disposal costs lends itself to only highly efficient sorting systems, which require high volumes of material to be processed to justify their high capital costs," Salisbury said. "We generally find contractors are extremely price-sensitive and require recycling to be the same or less, although this is slowly changing in some markets."

The price of metal is at a historical low, Salisbury said. Even though metal makes up only between 2 and 5 percent of what is disposed of, it is often relied on to offset a large portion of processing costs.

And, as Salisbury mentioned, government agencies have the power to greatly influence recycling behaviors.

"From a regulatory standpoint," he said, "Wisconsin government seems to take a progressive but cautious approach to promoting and regulating recycling of construction materials."

Madison, for instance, has set recycling standards governing both new construction and remodeling work.

In new construction projects involving both concrete and steel supports, the city now requires contractors to recycle 70 percent of the construction debris by weight.

Additionally, when new construction involves wood framing, the recycling requirement applies to clean wood and drywall, shingles, corrugated cardboard and metal. The same rule applies to remodeling projects with a value greater than \$20,000.

Meyers said the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certification of buildings, more commonly known as LEED, also helps drive recycling.

LEED certifications offer builders a way of proving that their products have indeed been undertaken in accordance with green standards. They can also be a condition of obtaining various sort of government tax incentives.

LEED offers several levels of certification, including silver, gold and platinum. In general, moving up from one level to the next requires designing buildings to better conserve energy and otherwise prevent harm to the environment.

Among the ways developers can move from one level to the next is by recycling more of the waste generated by a particular project, as well as by making greater use of recycled building materials.

In 2014, Meyers said, Milwaukee sent 8,138 tons of recovered construction materials from various dropoff sites to a materials-recovery operation run by Waste Management on Milwaukee's north side.

The same year also saw the recycling of 2,883 tons of residential asphalt shingles and 3,173 tons of concrete that had been left at the dropoff sites.

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