

Compactor uses energy from sun

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There's a new trash can in town, and its name is BigBelly.

The city's Downtown Operations Department is testing the new trash system for the next 30 days by placing two solar-powered BigBelly Cordless Compaction Systems at high-traffic spots in Alamo Plaza.

Through a solar panel on top, the BigBelly uses the sun's energy to run a 12-volt battery that powers a compactor inside the can. Because of the compaction, the system reduces collections by four times or more, according to manufacturer Seahorse Power Co.

BigBelly is the flagship product of the Boston-based company, said Vice President of Sales Richard Kennelly. Seahorse Power owner James Poss invented the system, according to the company's Web site.

Paula Stallcup, director of the Downtown Operations Department, said the city is running its own pilot program to see if the compactors make a difference in collections.

"We'll evaluate the number of times we have to empty them versus how many times we empty our other regular cans," she said. "So we'll leave them both out there to make that determination and try to better track the waste collection opportunities."

Stallcup said the city has been discussing the option for about a month. If the system proves effective at reducing waste collection costs, officials may consider purchasing additional containers, according to a news release.

T.J. Costello, owner of Box Free Thinking in Austin, is working with Seahorse and Solar Rubbish Containers, a manufacturing company in Florida, to help distribute the BigBelly throughout Texas. San Antonio is the first city to start using the system, with Austin currently working out the details, he said.

Costello said he thinks other cities, counties and parks will be quick to hop on the BigBelly bandwagon, especially with the push for a more "green" way of life. Money, however, is one issue, and cities need to look at the system as a long-term investment, he said.

If the pilot program is a success, Stallcup said the city would try to fit the system into its budget.

Kennelly said costs vary, but an average system costs around \$4,000 for one BigBelly. The city of Boston performed a cost analysis of the BigBelly and saw a return on investment in about 18 months, Kennelly said.

With a solar-powered trash compactor, it's not just about cost, Kennelly added.

"It's a much better aesthetic improvement," he said. "It's also a high-visibility green technology. A lot of people have never seen a solar panel, and even kids can see this at eye level and see it's doing work everyone can relate to. And that's a nice visible way cities can show they are taking advantage of clean renewable energy and reducing carbon emissions."

Seahorse Power incorporated in 2003 when it delivered its first BigBelly system to the ski-resort town of Vail, Colo., Kennelly said. After tweaking the Vail prototype, the company since has placed BigBelly in approximately 50 cities and at a number of other public places and private businesses, he said.

And everyone likes the fun name, he added.

"The big-belly is a species of seahorse, one of the largest, and it seems apt because the BigBelly trash compactor holds a lot in its belly," Kennelly said.