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Capitola tackles beach trash with solar bins

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CAPITOLA — With summer's arrival, city leaders hope visitors will admire the two latest beach attractions: BigBelly trash compactors.

"It's our elegant, beautiful, solar, very politically correct trash can," said Mayor Michael Termini.

The solar-powered garbage cans, purchased in February for about \$4,500 each, look like stubby, green mailboxes.

Unlike the regular trash bins near the beach entrance, which overflow with pizza boxes and empty drink containers during the busy summer season, the BigBelly comes with a door. People drop trash in and the door shuts. Then, the trash gets compacted.

"Having to put out 30 trash cans doesn't do much for the landscape," said Termini.

The BigBelly is cordless, silent and leakproof. It automatically squishes trash to as much as a 10th of its original volume, and reduces the need for pickups as well as the air pollution spewed by garbage trucks.

City officials say the upfront costs will pay off in the long run in lower labor costs.

"These BigBellies seem to be the perfect solution," said Termini.

Other cities are picking up the compactors to keep trash under control in high-traffic areas, too.

In March, Santa Cruz installed one at Church Street by the Santa Cruz Cinema 9 and another in front of the Del Mar movie theater. The Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk also owns a BigBelly.

The BigBelly debuted in February 2004 in Vail, Colo. The devices have since been used in Boston and Orlando, Fla. There are more than 200 of the bins worldwide, including in Vancouver; Cincinnati, Ohio and Queens, N.Y.

Capitola is always ahead of the game when it comes to staying on top of environmental issues, said Lisa Murphy, assistant to the city manager.

"The city has been really pushing to be environmentally responsible," she said.

In addition to solar trash bins, city leaders are working to finalize an ordinance that would make it mandatory for food-service establishments to use packaging materials that are safe for the environment, such as cardboard.

The city also sponsors an annual e-waste collection day, an electronic recycling program. This year's date is Sept. 22.

Termini said he would like to eventually add more BigBellies in Capitola Village along the esplanade,

where most of the restaurants are located.

He likes how the enclosed design keeps litter neatly contained and out of sight, which keeps out pests and sea birds.

"And it keeps beaches clean," he said.

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