

No pain, no gain: one community's composting success

by Jerry Powell
Resource Recycling

**Altering a community's
garbage collection system
provides opportunities for
waste reduction.**

An Oklahoma community has shown that the political grief of changing a community's waste collection practices is worth the trouble. By instituting a yard organics collection and composting program, the City of Norman has attained sizable waste reduction at no cost.

After more than 20 years of collecting bagged garbage at the curb twice each week from residences, officials in Norman bit the bullet in October 1990 and decided to have garbage collected just one day per week and to have bagged yard wastes picked up on the other day.

And then the citizens screamed, only to calm down.

In the first weeks of the program, more than 2,000 residents called the city to complain. But when the city stuck with the program, more and more citizens

made the change to keep yard organics separate from wastes. Now nearly 50 percent of the residents set out yard wastes for collection (some others compost on-site).

The yard wastes are collected by city crews in the same vehicles used to pick up garbage. The yard organics are de-bagged at the curb when placed in the compacting truck.

A modern site

The collected material is processed at a 7.5-acre site located at the city's wastewater treatment plant. The organics are dumped, processed in a tub grinder and placed in windrows on three acres of paved land. The windrows are then turned as needed. The composting operation includes four monitoring wells to



Yard wastes are deposited in windrows on three acres of paved land in Norman, Oklahoma's waste-water treatment plant.



When the composting site is completed, it will be fully paved, fenced and landscaped with trees and flowers planted around the borders.

determine the effect, if any, of operations on groundwater.

When the city adds the finishing touches to the composting site, it will be fully paved and fenced, with trees and wild flowers planted around the borders.

The finished compost is being given away to residents and commercial enterprises, such as landscapers and nurs-

eries. Donations are about evenly divided between homeowners and businesses. "Demand is there for the compost," says Todd Jenson, an administrative assistant in the city's manager's office.

Many benefits

City officials have been astounded by

the program's outcome. "The results are tremendous," notes Jenson. The municipality saved \$75,000 in the first year in waste disposal fees (or a savings of about \$4.58 per cubic yard of organics). Of a greater magnitude, the city also saved about \$100,000 in the first year by eliminating a waste collection crew and vehicle. When balanced against yard waste collection and composting costs of \$178,000 during this period, the city figures it basically broke even.

More impressively, the 16,000 cubic yards of collected and composted material in the first year represents a 24 percent reduction in Norman's residential solid waste volumes.

Problems addressed

The program has not been without operational problems. The first tub grinder the city used was undersized and could not keep up with collected volumes. Thus, wastes on the site were not processed quickly, which resulted in odor and aesthetic problems. The installation of an industrial-grade grinder has mitigated these concerns. **RR**