

## City giving no refuge for rogue refuse



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Cabinet doors found at Hastings composting site are not considered compostable material. Though the cabinets are made of wood, the paint, screws and metal handles do not decompose and are hazards.

The Hastings City Council is working to find a solution to stop excessive use and misuse of the city's compost site. In recent years, items other than compostable material have been dumped at the site with the cost going to city taxpayers. Also, the sheer volume of material being placed at the site by both city and non-city residents is exceeding the city's capacity to process the material.

As part of state licensing requirements, compostable material has to be broken down, composted and removed from the site within a three-year period. Non-compostable material, such as plastic and metal, cannot be mixed in. Some materials that may be mistaken as compostable, such as large tree trunks, are unacceptable at a compost site because they would take longer than three years to break down or must be broken down mechanically, which is expensive.

Hastings uses a windrow composting method, which begins with compostable material being formed into a series of long thin lines. The material is periodically turned to allow air into the mix and control moisture. When the compost is ready, it is mixed with top soil and sand to create high-quality topsoil. The process is efficient and cost-effective, given the right temperature, moisture and material. The material is then used around the city when crews do construction jobs, such as replacing sidewalks. They'll take the composted material, once it's degraded enough to turn into topsoil, and use it for along sidewalks and fill in behind new curbs.

"It helps keep the city's expense down," said Hastings Mayor David Tossava. "If we can't compost it [material at the drop-off site], then we have to buy the stuff."

The composting service first began approximately 25 years ago, said city manager Jeff Mansfield.

Healthy economic conditions allowed the city to offer curbside pick-up of compostable material. As the economy became more challenged, Mansfield said cuts had to be made.

Working to balance the needs of city residents with the city budget, a drop-off site was established behind the department of public services garage.

"Initially, we weren't getting a lot of material," said Mansfield, "but that grew over time, and we started getting more and more; particularly on the weekends. Our guys were spending a good share of Monday mornings loading it all up and hauling it to the landfill. Then it got so they were spending a couple hours every morning loading up the truck

because there was so much material left behind the garage.”

Mansfield said the abundance of compost material was “kind of a good problem” because it showed people were wanting to do the right thing for the city and the environment, but the process was expensive. Taxpayers were bearing the cost whether they used the service or not because the money came out of general funds.

The drop-off site at the garage was eliminated about three years ago, and residents were directed to bring material, such as yard clippings and leaves, to the city compost site. Large signs were placed at the West State Road site asking for cooperation, specifying its use is for city residents only and only composted material is acceptable. However, with the passing of time, recurring problems have become evident at the unmonitored site.

Another problem faced by the city is people dumping what they may believe is compostable but is not. Painted cabinet remnants, painted crates and treated lumber are a few of the things being found at the compost site. Although made of wood, thick lumber does not break down in the three years required. Painted material and treated lumber cannot be composted due to possible lead contamination. Oil-based paint also is considered a contaminant. Mansfield said public service personnel must pick up the garbage and haul it to the landfill, and their time and the fee for disposal is at the cost of city taxpayers.

“We’re getting very large trees now from tree services and other commercial vendors, primarily,” Mansfield said. “Well, that doesn’t break down. There are ways you can get that to break down. You have to use a device called a tub grinder, but that’s extremely expensive and extremely maintenance-intensive to operate. It’s very costly.

“At some point, we’re going to have to rent a tub grinder and grind up a bunch of that stuff. Then it will decompose, but that shouldn’t even be necessary. The taxpayers shouldn’t have to pay for that, particularly when it’s from a professional vendor. When it’s from a tree service, I personally think they have a responsibility to dispose of their own material.”

Hastings continues to provide curbside leaf pickup each spring and fall. After heavy storms, the city also provides pick-up. Tossava said with the service provided, through the summer, most Hastings’ residents have simple lawn clippings or garden weeds to dispose of. Tossava said he has strong opinions regarding commercial dumping and people who are not Hastings residents using a service supported by city taxpayers.

“The people that I’ve asked to leave out there when I’ve been there (and this has been a couple of times), it’s been people from the township or commercial cutters, and those two are the problem we have.”

Tossava said he encountered someone last week leaving large limbs at the site. The man was from a nearby township, and Tossava told him the site is for city taxpayer use only.

“He said, ‘Well, I’ve been dumping here for years,’” Tossava said. “We need to re-educate some people, and part of the re-education is closing on the weekends. I think

we need to bend over backwards for the citizens of Hastings, but I don't think we need to do the same thing for the township people at the expense of city taxpayers."

Tossava attributed part of the problem at the compost site to dwindling options due to the growth of development. He said with subdivisions and upper-end housing construction, farm fields and other common drop areas are no longer available. With Hastings having one of few composting sites, surrounding township residents use it as a matter of convenience and because of a lack of other options.

Mansfield and Tossava agree education about the composting site will help reduce the issues the city has been facing, but first those issues have to be brought to the forefront. Some measures have to be taken to temporarily get a handle on the problem, Mansfield said.

The compost site will be open 7 a.m. Monday through Friday, and drop-off must be no later than 3 p.m. The gates will close at 3:30 p.m. City employees come and go from the site weekdays, picking up sand and other material used in city projects, increasing the probability they would spot violators disposing improper material. The drop-off deadline was chosen to avoid overtime for public service employees who would have to stay past 3:30 p.m.

The city has been researching long-term solutions to the problem, such as starting conversations with surrounding townships to create a central drop site for other municipalities and sharing the cost. The compost site, the problems being addressed and possible change to days and times of operation will be discussed further at the city council meeting 7 p.m. Monday, Aug. 14, at Hastings City Hall.

"We want the public to know we want to work with them," said Tossava.

No set decisions have been made. However, city employees have received calls and letters from residents concerned about the hours conflicting with work schedules. Mansfield said several complaints about possible changes have come from a commercial tree-cutting service, arguing the trees it dumps at the site come from city properties and should be allowed.

"We're not doing this to take something away from people. That's not anything we want to do," said Mansfield. "We're just trying to get the bigger picture out there to let people know what we're trying to deal with, and we're working to find the best way to deal with it for everyone involved. Also, we want to find a way to pay for it that fair for everyone. We need to get our arms around this first and foremost, and then we can be accommodating."