

## **‘Reduce, reuse ... recalculate?’**

### **Taos Recycling Center loses money while town, citizens seek solutions**

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As the effects of climate change fuel a growing political energy in this county and around the world to address adequately the many environmental crises that stem from it, one of the tried-and-true solutions — recycling — holds a questionable place in strategies for sustainability in Taos.

The old wisdom of “reduce, reuse, recycle” is giving way to people calling for abandoning plastics altogether. But even while efforts across the state to ban single use plastics have gained momentum, the Taos Recycling Center is showing a massive deficit in the local government’s operations budget.

The Taos Recycling Center sells their collected materials but officials are saying the revenues don’t cover the costs of the recycling program.

“Revenues are market-driven. The more product in the market the lower the value of that product becomes,” said Taos Public Works Director Fransisco Espinoza.

“Because of that, I don’t believe that any small center will be profitable.”

#### The hole

This isn’t to say Espinoza doesn’t know how important recycling is to Taoseños.

“The Town of Taos knows that the recycling center is very important to the people who utilize it,” Espinoza said. “What the community must remember is that there are significant costs associated with operating such a center and should not be subsidized by only one entity.”

The Taos Recycling Center takes numbers one and two plastics (numbers marked on the bottom of all plastic containers), which people have to wash before unloading at the center. The center also takes corrugated cardboard, aluminum and tin cans, glass and paper.

Recycled material at the center is collected and compacted into large cubes and stored until the center can sell them. Glass at the center is ground down to make sand and pebbles that Espinoza said was once used as road salt filler, though the town has stopped using glass for that purpose.

While the center may save materials from going in the landfill near the airport, it’s created a budgetary hole for the town of Taos to fill.

Last year, the recycling center brought in over \$83,000 by selling certain recyclables.

But at the same time, the center's operation costs topped \$290,000.

Espinoza estimates the utility bill alone of the recycling center to be upward of \$90,000 a year, with an electronic baler accounting for most of that cost. Salaries come in at a close second, as the center employs three people full time.

Recycled glass alone costs the center \$16,000 per year to crush into sand and pebbles.

The town charges Taos residents using a 96 gallon garbage container a 75-cent monthly recycling fee that is put toward operations at the center. This fee has not increased in a decade, according to public works officials, and the revenue collected from this is the only other source of income for the recycling center.

According to Espinoza, cardboard is really the only material from which the center continuously makes a good amount of money. The center sells its cardboard to Town Recycling in Albuquerque. As of 10 a.m. Tuesday (April 30), the price per ton of cardboard was \$30.

And running the recycling center does save money in another way. Espinoza said that every year, the center keeps tons of materials out of the Taos Regional Landfill; diverting all that plastic and other materials to the landfill would also cost the town and its residents.

Cardboard aside, Town Councilor Pascualito Maestas recognized this hole and said something has to be done.

"We have thrown around a lot of options, but haven't settled on anything," he said.

### Potential solutions

Several options have been proposed about the recycling center in Taos to make it more financially independent.

Because the center serves people who don't live within town boundaries and don't pay the nominal recycling fee, some of those solutions have eyed county residents particularly. One idea is to charge a recycling fee for county residents; consolidating the recycling center with the Regional Landfill Board could make it easier to collect the fee from Taos County residents.

Still another option is to close the center to county residents entirely, but town officials say this is an unlikely solution.

"I don't prefer this option," Maestas said.

"It would take personnel to check bills and allow town residents or turn away county residents. It also wouldn't necessarily solve the deficit," he said.

## Moving forward

The conundrum of losing money for recycling has prompted some groups and businesses around Taos to look at a more drastic solution: stop using plastics completely.

Plastic Free Taos is a group of community members who began conversations recently about moving businesses away from using plastic, stopping the recycling issue at its source.

Some businesses have already taken a serious look at their waste and made the choice to reduce.

Pablo Flores and Lydia McHaley, owners of Coffee Apothecary, decided to take their two-year-old business completely waste free by 2020.

Plastic is a cultural problem in the U.S. with so many products packaged in single-use plastics, Flores said.

“There’s really no feasible, economic way of using [plastic] and it’s just piling up,” Flores said.

Most of what McHaley and Flores take to the recycling center is plastic, which makes the town little to no money (selling recycled plastic has not been profitable in 2019).

In just over two years, their business has sold over 65,000 paper “to go” cups, which is equal to over a ton of material, they said. After this realization, McHaley said she hopes Taos can make some changes when it comes to using plastic and single-use items in the future.

“Start small and don’t get overwhelmed,” McHaley said about the transition to a wastefree business and community. “Think about ways you can make a difference.”

The company has been trying to use fewer and fewer single-use plastic and paper products. They’re even looking for suppliers who bottle milk in glass, rather than plastic jugs.

Some cities across the country, including Albuquerque, have already started taking steps to rid the streets of plastic: New Mexico’s largest city recently passed a ban on single-use plastic bags in an effort to stop their waste.

Bags that meet recycling or biodegrading standards are still permissible, according to the city’s website. Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller signed the plastic ban in an Earth Day ceremony last week, saying: “Our commitment to sustainability isn’t just about what we do today, or even tomorrow. It’s about living up to our responsibility to future generations.”

For the time being, the recycling center will remain open until officials and the center can agree on a solution to fill in the deficit recycling creates. Staff at the center are encouraging the community not to bring trash to the center and abide by the rules of the bins.