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Construction waste recycling on the rise

Picking up

By Brian Sodoma
Special Publications writer

In a city ridiculed for its residents' lack of initiative when it comes to recycling, developers can also take it on the chin for the waste they produce with their glitzy new projects. But a growing group of building-community members want to make it known that a good portion of their construction waste isn't headed for the local dump — it's being reused.

Large commercial projects such as MGM MIRAGE's Project CityCenter and the \$107 million Molasky Corporate Center in downtown Las Vegas have received much attention for their implementation of green building elements, and their LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certifications from the U.S. Green Building Council. But while design specifications such as the use of indirect light, high-efficiency ventilation systems and the use of recycled materials make the headlines, construction waste hauling that gets diverted from the dump and reused is slowly becoming the norm.

"It's getting to the point where we are even including it in our specs for projects that are not pursuing LEED certification," said Lance Kirk, an intern architect with Lucchesi Galati Architects in Las Vegas.

National figures estimate between 30 percent and 40 percent of all landfill waste comes from construction sites. Kirk, a member of the Las Vegas chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, also said developers are recognizing there is some necessity to recycling waste because of the increasing cost of building materials. "It just makes sense. ... It's also very expensive to take things to the dump," he added.

No one knows the high cost of dumping fees more than Rob Dorinson, CEO of Evergreen Recycling, a local construction waste hauler that diverts most of the waste it collects to recyclers around the country. Dorinson contends that recycling construction waste is as much an economic necessity as it is good for the environment.

"If I was in this business (waste hauling) and I couldn't recycle, I'd have to charge 30 percent more (for dumping) than I do," he said. "At the same time, this is what we do. Evergreen Recycling, it's what we are."

Pamela Vilkin, president of the Las Vegas chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council, and a principal with Tradewinds Construction, was first introduced to Evergreen a few years ago, when she used the company for the city's Regional Animal Campus project. She has used Evergreen ever since.

"For me it was a no-brainer. ... For me it's a case of using less virgin materials. ... I even pay Rob to keep a Dumpster out front of our plumbing and fabrication division. All the iron, trash metal, I know he's going to recycle it," she said.

Dumping fees at the Apex landfill, which is owned by Republic Services, have quadrupled since the mid-'90s, and local waste haulers responded over the past decade by reducing the number of loads they take to the site and recycling instead.

Dorinson, who has been in the waste hauling and recycling business for 10 years, is also in the process of building his own 50,000-square-foot material recovery facility which will probably double the size of his workforce to 50, and help him handle the extra volume that has been created by contracts for large projects such as CityCenter and Molasky Corporate Center.

Dorinson runs what he calls a "dump and pick" operation where his trash bins are brought back to his site and sorted by manual labor. "It's really gotten to the point where it's not really efficient," he said of the process. His company has a 50 percent diversion rate, and he hopes to be in the 80 percent range once the facility is up and running.

Dorinson also said a big reason for the increase in interest in recycling construction waste comes from the passing of Assembly Bill 3 in 2005, which offers tax credits to building owners who incorporate green building concepts into their projects. If a project receives a LEED rating of silver or higher, the owner could receive tax abatements up to 50 percent for up to

ten years in some cases. Prior to Assembly Bill 3, there were roughly two million square feet of LEED certified projects. Now there is more than 22 million -- 17 million of which is MGM MIRAGE's CityCenter.

Suzanne Sanders, vice president of design and development of the Molasky Group of Companies, whose Molasky Corporate Center project sent 860 cubic feet of waste to recycling in November and has eclipsed 80 percent for its recycling rate on the project, says recycling initiatives in Las Vegas still have a way to go for all developers to really jump on board. So far Molasky has spent \$10,000 to recycle its construction waste on the project. She pointed to issues with recycling gypsum board, or drywall, as an example of a situation where the demand for the commodity is there, but transporting it brings on a cost burden. "On one level they (National Gypsum) are happy to buy it back, but they're not receptive to trucking their own yet," she said.

Dorinson and Sanders also agree the issue of global need for recycled product and more "end-users" moving to the valley will be a big help for future waste recycling in the valley. Asian countries need plastic, which has helped Dorinson's situation, and a local compost company has been using a lot of his shredded wood.

Sanders added that when there is more competition for recyclable materials on a local level, costs for recycling some construction waste will come down.

"I don't think we can really afford to wait on this. I came from California where they recycled everything. They paid you to recycle. It's gotta happen," she added. "In other markets certain commodities have value and they (the end user) pay you to take it. Now people want to be paid to take it (recyclables) from you. ... Our market is not sophisticated enough yet." **cre**

Rob Dorinson, CEO of Evergreen Recycling, is building a 50,000 square-foot material recovery facility for construction waste sorting.

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