

BERRIEN COUNTY

# Crunching the numbers for household waste collection

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**ST. JOSEPH** — During 18 years of operation, Berrien County's household hazardous waste program has collected 1.2 million pounds of materials for recycling or safe disposal.

The popular drop-off service, one of several in the county's environmental program, has provided 20,100 residents with an outlet for chemicals, paint, oil and other potentially harmful products that would otherwise end up in a landfill.

Jill Adams, environmental property manager for the county, said Thursday that residents have gotten accustomed to using the hazardous waste dropoffs, held 7 to 9 times a year at various places.

There are also electronics recycling days and two tire drop-offs each year. The county also works with other organizations to provide safe disposal options for unwanted medicines and pesticides.

"With three landfills in the county, we want to keep these materials out of our municipal waste," she told the county board's Personnel and Human Services Committee.

The county began its electronics recycling effort 11 years ago. People can drop off TVs, computers, appliances or other devices for recycling.

Green Earth Electronics Recycling, St. Joseph, contracts with the county to handle the materials that are dropped off — 860,000 pounds to date.

No law prohibits disposal of e-waste with trash, Adams said, but people would rather see the materials recycled.

A growing problem is finding companies that will handle cathode ray tubes and the leaded glass used in old TVs and computers.

The problem will diminish as the old units are replaced by flat screen TVs and other newer



HP file photo

**Workers organize unwanted appliances, electronics and household hazardous waste in April at Lake Michigan College in Benton Township.**

technology, she said.

But the number of recyclers handling the old electronics is diminishing, Adams said.

The tire drop-off program has received about 28,000 tires so far. It's a labor intensive effort that relies on help from a jail work crew and volunteers.

"Filling two semis with tires is a lot of work," Adams said.

The tires are picked up by Deerpath Recycling in Dowagiac. The company converts the scrap tires into rubber for new products, while some are re-treaded.

Adams said the program counts on a lot of volunteers. The largest dropoff each year — Reduce, Reuse, Recycle Day — held at Lake Michigan College in Benton Township, gets help from dozens of students and others.

The county participates in the Clean Sweep pesticides program, run through the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

It provides places to drop off unwanted pesticides for free.

To date, Berrien County residents have dropped off 143,000 pounds of

pesticide and 1,200 pounds of mercury.

Adams said very old pesticides continue to show up, including DDT, which was banned in the U.S. in 1972 because of its harm to wildlife and link to cancer.

People find it in old farm buildings or other places and bring it to the Clean Sweep dropoff.

The county environmental program also awards \$10,000 in recycling grants to schools each year, providing money for equipment and projects.

While county officials say they're committed to continuing the array of recycling and education efforts, that will require changes in the funding mechanism in the years ahead.

Cost of the environmental program is covered by money collected years ago in the Landfill Use Fund. The fund is supported by tipping fees on waste going into three state-licensed landfills in the county.

The program was paid directly from the fund until 2001. The county board at that time decided to change the formula of the fund so that 85 percent went to infrastructure improvement and 15 percent to townships that have

landfills. The environmental program continued to operate with a large surplus that had built up in the Landfill Use Fund.

Now that surplus is running down, although there's enough money to last for at least two more years, said county Administrator Bill Wolf.

The landfill fund has taken in an average of \$484,397 annually. The environmental program's budget is \$297,472.

Commissioner Andrew Vavra, chairman of the Personnel and Human Services Committee, said that in light of the need to pay for the environmental program, it's time to re-evaluate how the landfill fund is used.

In the past year, the environmental program was shifted from the Community Development Department to parks.

Community Development Director Dan Fette said steps were taken to reduce program costs, which at one time topped \$400,000 a year.

One measure that has saved money was to charge small fees to drop off certain materials for recycling, such as TVs and computer monitors.

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