

In Business LAS VEGAS



Recycling amid recession: Construction waste is sorted at Evergreen Recycling in Las Vegas. The company recycles about 400 tons of construction, commercial and industrial waste a month.

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A mountain of debris looms behind a giant backhoe in an open-air warehouse in Las Vegas. Dust swirls as masses of nearly indistinguishable trash are dumped unceremoniously onto a steep conveyor belt. Earth movers, delivery trucks and workers perform a delicate dance as materials are sorted, piled and in some cases chopped to pieces under the mouth of a bulldozer.

"It's not pretty, but it works," said Matthew Heaton, general manager of Evergreen Recycling in Las Vegas, surveying the scene.

The Las Vegas-based recycling company processes roughly 400 tons of recyclable waste a month at its location off Nellis Boulevard. The company is attempting to balance shaky international materials markets, a fragile local economy and a goal of keeping reusable materials out of Apex Landfill with a basic need to increase its business.

The company started in 1997 hauling materials off vast home and office park construction sites across the valley. In 2007, at the height of the boom, it built its facility in Las Vegas. That bubble burst almost a year ago, but where there is trash, there are recyclable materials. And Las Vegas still has plenty of trash.

The company got a boost with a contract to recycle materials coming out of CityCenter. But that's a bubble of its own — although one with a predictable popping point. As that date looms, the company is reaching out to business owners across the valley, trying to sell the dream of green.

Strangely, the recession is helping. Some companies are coming to Evergreen not only because recycling looks good on their Web sites, but because it's saving them money. And Evergreen's recycling services can usually lower a company's waste costs, according to its president, Robert Dorinson. "Businesses are coming in and looking for lower costs on waste removal," Dorinson said. "I think that's a trend now in every industry. All companies want to save money and are monitoring their expenses."

Some commercial property managers with empty storefronts are doing green renovations: improved insulation, energy-efficient air conditioning, programmable thermostats, low-flow restroom fixtures, energy-efficient lighting.

At the same time banks and new owners are sending teams through foreclosed homes, ripping up stained carpets, replacing punched-in drywall, pulling out dead plants and abandoned furniture. It's out with the old and in with the new — and the old has to go somewhere. And fast. "We can coordinate the timing to the customers' needs," Dorinson said. "When you have a small company it's easier to get personalized service. We put the bin where you want it, when you want it and how you want it."

Evergreen's next target? That trash can under your desk. "We've been able to go into certain industries and get new contracts," Dorinson said. "They just haven't understood the value of their waste. If they can separate the recyclables from the other waste, we can serve them and save them money."

As commercial office parks across the valley slowly empty, forward-thinking property managers are adding environmentally friendly perks such as free recycling service to try to retain tenants and entice new ones. "It's about putting yourself ahead of the pack," Dorinson said. "People are going to start asking for this. It might be what distinguishes your building from the next one."

It's also easy. Evergreen evaluates every client's waste, determining what can be recycled and how often it needs to be picked up. The cost depends on what goes into the bin and how long it sits on your property. High value materials such as metal scraps are going to get a lower rate — maybe even a rebate. Then Evergreen and their clients ride the wave of the international materials markets and hope for the best. There's not much it can't recycle.

Wood? No problem, it has an American Indian tribe in Moapa that needs pulverized green waste. Drywall? Yep — it sells it to a Sheetrock manufacturing plant across town. Rejected players' cards and gift cards? Sure thing. It has dozens of bags of chipped cards out back waiting to be shipped off.

"It's not necessarily easier to find buyers now than it used to be, but the volume in Las Vegas has risen," Dorinson said. "Buyers for these materials have put Las Vegas on their maps now. Now they know there's a steady supply here."

Sixteen percent of the stuff sent to the company's processing center has to be reverted to the trash bin. That's up from 7 percent last year. "We're getting a different mix of materials, and there are just some things that we can't sell now," Heaton said. "But we expect the markets to recover and that number will drop again soon."

The company spends 10 to 20 hours a week seeking new buyers. It's vital work as the global recession deepens and more of the small buyers Evergreen used to sell to go out of business. "All the markets have changed in the last few months," Heaton said. "A lot of the smaller businesses went out of business. We used to export one-third of our waste to the Pacific Rim countries. Now it's almost none."

Local companies, though, are still interested in recycling more of their waste. Some of this is driven by retail customers, many of whom are still trying to shop in businesses with sustainable practices. Because Evergreen monitors and records all waste taken in, it can give its clients tangible proof of their efforts.

"Lots of companies are trying to increase their green practices," Heaton said. "With us, they're recycling, but it's easy to track their waste stream."