

Mary Claypool: Waste facility more than a dump

Mary Claypool / Mind Your Business

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Some people might still call it a "dump," but the Monterey Regional Waste Management District, at the Monterey Regional Environmental Park at 14201 Del Monte Blvd. in Marina, is really an award-winning facility.

Every time I refer to it as the dump, General Manager William Merry quickly reminds me that it is much more, and he is right.

Yes, the district's primary purpose is to manage the Monterey Peninsula area's solid waste stream, but in recent years its role has expanded to include the recovery of recyclable materials in the waste stream, including cardboard, paper, glass, wood, yard waste, plastics, metals, drywall, concrete, asphalt, reusable building materials and resale items. It is home to the first landfill gas-to-electrical energy system in Central California, installed in 1983. More than 4,000 kilowatts of continuous power are generated.

The district covers 853 square miles and serves 170,000 residents in Carmel, Del Rey Oaks, Marina, Monterey, Pacific Grove, Sand City, Seaside; and the unincorporated areas of Big Sur, Carmel Highlands, Carmel Valley, Castroville, Corral De Tierra, Laguna Seca, Moss Landing, Pebble Beach, San Benancio and Toro Park.

The Last Chance Mercantile reuse store offers used merchandise at affordable prices for those fixer-upper or remodeling projects. If you are looking for a specific item, you may have to make more than one trip, but it is worth it because there are new items every week. If you have any reusable goods to donate — such as furniture, toys or sporting goods — you may drop them off at the Last Chance Mercantile.

It also sells compost bins at a good price. If you are looking to paint your house and you are flexible on color, you can find a good bargain on paint. It is a great place for the serious bargain shopper. You may drop off e-waste — monitors, TVs, CPUs, cell phones, printers, fax and copy machines, as well as old alkaline and rechargeable batteries — for free.

As part of the hazardous waste program, district residents may drop off up to 15 gallons or 125 pounds, of household hazardous waste — this includes those products containing hazardous ingredients and labeled with words such as "danger," "warning," "caution," "poison," "flammable" or "corrosive."

The Materials Recovery Facility is diverting 64 percent of the incoming material from being deposited into the landfill. The facility not only processes paper, cardboard, bottles and cans, but also targets materials brought in from self-haul loads and commercial wastes, construction and demolition debris, wood waste and yard waste.

The landfill started capturing approximately 864,000 cubic feet of gas per day in 1983, and in 1994 expanded the project not only to produce enough power to meet all of its own needs but to generate a surplus of electricity that is sold to Pacific Gas & Electric Co. It was the first in the United States to use Austrian-made Jenbacher engines, which are designed to burn landfill gas and are used extensively in Europe and other parts of the world.

The system collects 1.5 million cubic feet of gas per day from a 100-acre area containing refuse buried for nearly 40 years, producing 4,400 kilowatts of electricity, enough to power all the operations on-site. The surplus, sold to PG&E, provides electricity to more than 3,400 homes. This saves the district approximately \$230,000 per year. The district grosses \$1,400,000 from the project, including an Energy Renewable Incentive payment.

The Small Planet School Education Program, offered free to all schools, colleges and youth programs in the district, educates elementary to graduate students about waste reduction, reuse, recycling and composting.

Coordinators visit classrooms, make presentations, host field trips to on-site recycling facilities and the landfill, provide teacher workshops and maintain a resource library for teachers. They offer technical assistance for waste reduction, recycling, gardening and composting programs in the schools.

The landfill receives tons of solid wastes, commercial and industrial waste, dewatered sewage sludge, tons of waste from small businesses and individuals who haul their own trash and tons of liquid waste. Tons of that solid waste are recycled or diverted from the landfill, with an impressive diversion rate of 39 percent.

As you can see, there is a lot going on at the "dump," and the district board and staff deserve the awards and recognition they have received. The district is an example of how recycling and innovation combine to create jobs and generate additional revenue.

For details on the district's program and services, see www.mrwmd.org.

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