

## Another recession ill: too little garbage

By KELLY NIX

IT'S NO secret that because of the recession, people are buying less stuff. Not surprisingly, that means people also aren't throwing as much stuff away. While some may believe less waste is a good thing, that's not what landfill operators think. A decline in trash translates into less revenue and fewer jobs.

The Marina landfill is no different.

Since 2006, the Monterey Regional Waste Management District has seen a more than 30 percent decline in the amount of commercial and residential waste — a drop off in business that's forced a hiring freeze and other spending cutbacks at the landfill.

"In the past, there was a perception that waste disposal was almost recession-proof," said Jeff Lindenthal, the MRWMD public education and recycling manager. "However, I think this recent recession disproved that myth."

The MRWMD measures the amount of commercial and residential waste it collects in tons. At the end of the 2009/2010 fiscal year, the landfill had taken in 197,000 tons. That's compared to a peak of 279,904 tons of trash in 2005.

"For the past three years, we were in a continuing downward cycle," Lindenthal said.

MRWMD officials first began noticing a decline in waste in 2006.

"In the beginning, we were seeing the biggest drop in commercial" trash, he said.

"As time went on, we started to see the drop in residential as well."

The decline in commercial waste is attributed to the drop off in development and fewer home and business remodels, while there's been a decline in residential trash because people aren't buying as much as they did when the economy was sound, and therefore are not throwing as much away.

It's not only Marina that's taken a hit.

Landfills across the country have seen a decline in the amount of waste over the past several years because of the recession.

But officials believe there's more to it than that. Increased recycling efforts and the proliferation of the green and sustainable living movements have also helped.

"Those efforts have translated into less material going to the landfill," Lindenthal said.

After first noticing the decline four years ago, the MRWMD reacted quickly to adjust to the loss of revenue.

"One of the first things we did was implement a hiring freeze," he explained. "As job

positions became open, we didn't refill them."

The MRWMD didn't lay off any workers, but through attrition, its workforce declined by about 15 percent.

There are signs, however, that the worst may be over.

There was a slight increase in waste for this year's first six months over the first six months of the previous fiscal year.

"If we regard the refuse delivered to our site as an economic indicator," Lindenthal said, "the first six months of this year would seem to represent a stabilizing, or an upturn, of the economy."

That has led MRWMD to advertise for a couple of laborer positions, the first time since 2006 it's sought to fill job vacancies, Lindenthal said.

"We are optimistic we have reached the bottom of the decline," he said.

"In the past, we have always funded our operations based on the disposal tonnage," explained Lindenthal. "Now we are recognizing it's an outdated funding mechanism, and we are working on exploring other funding scenarios."

The MRWMD has hired a Santa Clara County consultant to come up with new ways to make money, and a report on the possibilities could be released as early as December.

The landfill has space for more than 39,000,000 tons of waste before it must be closed down and another site found.

Officials estimate the landfill — which is already filled to a depth of 130 feet — is good for another 166 years.

