

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF MARCH 5-11, 2014

www.FloridaWeekly.com

Vol. VII, No. 47 • FREE

talking TRASH

LEE, COLLIER AND CHARLOTTE COUNTIES PRODUCE MILLIONS OF TONS OF TRASH EVERY YEAR. SOLID WASTE FACILITIES KNOW JUST WHAT TO DO WITH IT



BY EVAN WILLIAMS
ewilliams@floridaweekly.com

THERE ARE NO MOUNTAINS IN Southwest Florida, unless you count mountains of trash: landfills that rise up to 13 stories above the ground. Here, an intimate and complete history of who we are is buried every day. The endless stream of refuse reflects birthday parties and dream homes; graduation dinners and heart surgeries; tech gadgets and teddy bears; grade school math problems and porce-

lain thrones. An occasional diamond ring ends up here by mistake.

An increasing amount, too, is being turned into commodities instead of buried. Environmental concerns and efforts to streamline the recycling process have dramatically slowed the growth of landfills, lest



Lindsay Sampson, director, Lee County Solid Waste Division

SEE TRASH, A8 ▶

Professor learns that mountains come in many forms

BY MARI DE WEES

Special to Florida Weekly

After a year's planning and a trip of 1,884 miles, I lay sick and wretched on the side of snow-capped Volcano Cotopaxi, just 3,600 feet from my goal. At 15,744 feet on the side of the mountain near Quito, Ecuador, altitude sickness had overcome me. Head pounding, stomach churning, I lay in the dark, frigid refuge house. Too weak to sit up, I listened as my fellow climbers set out to face bone-chilling 80 mph winds in



COURTESY PHOTO

Cotopaxi looms large in this view from the city of Latacunga, Ecuador.

an effort to make it to the summit.

Although he could have chosen to go with the group, my husband, Andy Bravo ('98, Accounting), stayed by my side, tending to me over eight hours that seemed like days.

When I was able to think about something beyond my miserable condition, I realized that this experience — and its unexpected turn in circumstance — starkly resembled the journey that people with

SEE JOURNEY, A16 ▶

INSIDE



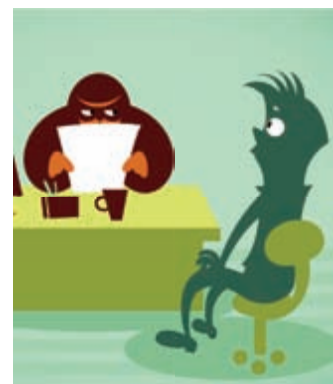
On The Water

Your guide to living, dining and playing on the coast. INSERT ▶



'War Horse'

A mechanical equine with heart. C1 ▶



Hard to hire

Workers dogged by their criminal and financial pasts. B1 ▶



New hospital

Promise Healthcare begins construction in Fort Myers. A28 ▶

Download our FREE App today

Available on the iTunes and Android App Store.



PSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
FORT MYERS, FL
PERMIT NO. 715

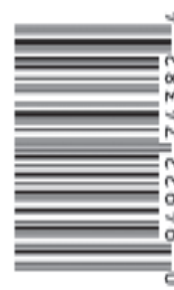
ROGER WILLIAMS A2
OPINION A4
ANTIQUES A13
NEWS OF THE WEIRD A14

HEALTHY LIVING A38
PETS A42
BUSINESS B1
REAL ESTATE B9

ARTS C1
EVENTS C6-7
SOCIETY C32-36
CUISINE C39



WEEKNIGHTS AFTER NEWS AT 11:00





In Lee County, garbage is dumped onto the tipping floor, pushed into the storage pit and moved by the grappling hook into the furnace hopper.

COURTESY PHOTOS

TRASH

From page 1

the region straddle one massive heap of detritus in some distant, dystopian future. Florida is also pushing counties to recycle at least 75 percent of their solid waste by 2020, a goal the legislature enacted as a statute in 2008.

“So many people aren’t aware — they just throw it at the curb and it goes away. But there’s a whole world that happens to it after that,” said Molly Schweers, Lee County solid waste coordinator.

For a glimpse into this epic world of rubbish, *Florida Weekly* visited the solid waste hubs in Lee, Collier and Charlotte counties. They process close to 2 million tons of material every year, the facilities reported. The coastal stretch is home to an estimated 1.1 million people, a population that could grow to 1.8 million residents by 2040, a University of Florida projection shows. We each produce four to five pounds of garbage per day by the federal government’s average.

When Southwest Florida landfills began operating in the mid-1970s, nearly everything was buried. Officials recalled that smelly methane gas produced by decomposing trash amassed in huge bubbles. It rolled underneath tarps stretched over the surface of landfills before leaking out into the air. The process was called “whaling” because the gas bubbles looked like “a Goodyear blimp or a whale on its side,” said Dan Rodriguez, Collier County’s solid waste management director. Now, gas wells trap methane and it’s used to generate electric energy that goes back into the grid.

Each county now also offers “single stream” recycling. Residents toss recyclables in one container and they’re separated by machine elsewhere. Charlotte County was the most recent to start using the method.

“It’s so much easier to recycle now,” said Charlotte Commissioner Tricia Duffy. “Just in our own home, it’s cut our trash in half. And that just happened in the last four or five months.”

The system requires that people separate trash — such as plastic bags or wrapping, and loose or shredded paper — from recyclables like water bottles, junk mail, and tin cans.

Waste-to-energy programs and



The weigh station at the Collier County landfill, where trucks come and go. All the material generated in the county comes through here, and the entire landfill area is closely monitored from this point.

efforts to reuse and recycle help counties keep the cost low for this most basic of government services. In unincorporated Charlotte County, that’s \$148 per year for one residence; in Lee, \$178; and in Collier, \$173. That’s the same for each household no matter the appraised property value or the number of people living there. What other essential service can you buy for less than \$15 a month?

“It’s a real bargain,” said Lindsey Sampson, the long-time director of Lee County’s solid waste division.

Recovering waste

Lindsey Sampson kicked a small, filthy cabbage back into a larger pile of garbage from which it had rolled.

“A soccer cabbage,” he commented, smiling good-naturedly.

It was in a dim, dusty warehouse-like space in east Lee County. Residential and commercial garbage trucks, which begin picking up trash before sunup, pull in here 12 hours a day. Among our multi-faceted garbage, this is a destination for things we can’t recycle. About 1,800 tons of it per day is burned here

at temperatures topping 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

Generators harness the energy that creates, enough electricity to power about 36,000 homes. Steam is released through a 275-foot flue outside that juts up into the sky, a monument to municipality.

There is a sour, complex aroma inside that at first makes it impossible to take a deep breath without gagging a little. As trucks unload refuse in staggering volumes, a front-end loader pushes it ever forward into the pit, a 30-foot deep concrete bunker lit by pale orange bulbs that bring to mind parking lots at night. Blackbirds and egrets search for scraps in the gloom.

As in a classic arcade game, two enormous grapple claws reach into the pit. But instead of goofy stuffed snakes or bags of pirate’s gold, they grab somewhere between 6,000 and 10,000 pounds of garbage and drop it into an incinerator that never stops burning, day or night.

Outside this room at Lee County’s rural 300-acre central waste processing site, which opened in the early 1990s,

the air is fresh and clean. Abutting the property is Buckingham Community Park and Little League fields.

The county’s active landfill, where ash from the incinerator is shipped, actually sits elsewhere. Lee long ago agreed to process Hendry County’s trash in exchange for building a landfill there.

After the burning process, machines also separate out useable metals, such as aluminum, that are melted down.

“The idea is to recover in a practical way either material or energy,” said Mr. Sampson.

In all, the county with its 643,000-some residents processes more than 900,000 tons of material per year in a number of different ways. For instance, mulch is turned to compost, much of it sold in Hendry County and deposited at citrus groves.

It’s all weighed in at the scale house. Much also ends up at a vast recycling facility filled with bales of different materials such as aluminum cans or paper. Lee County is consistently ranked in the top five of the state’s 67 counties for recycling, which Mr.

Sampson attributes to a combination of the system he runs and private businesses (including big box stores) that handle their own recycling.

Officials expect Lee's landfill to last another 15 years as it operates now, before filling up. After that, the county will likely need another landfill, and to look at options such as building another waste-to-energy facility, Mr. Sampson said. He adds that projections are always subject to change.

Keeping it clean

Michael Stark sat in a white pickup truck at the top of the landfill in south Collier, an observation point for tours of the facility. It was a blustery day but the smell of garbage wasn't on the wind or anywhere else.

"This is one of the cleanest landfills you'll see in the state of Florida," pointed out Mr. Stark, manager of solid waste operations. The county uses the services of Waste Management to operate the facility.

Far off to the left, dump trucks unloaded their haul on a lower hill. It's kept relatively smell free by spraying it with Posi Shell, an environmentally friendly concrete mix that hardens over the top. A column of birds dominated by turkey vultures — but including a wide variety such as bald eagles and egrets — rose and swirled above this central scavenging site.

Among other wildlife here are deer and "raccoons the size of Rottweilers," Mr. Stark added.

Meanwhile, trucks arrived at the scale house at the entrance to the property. Everything coming in is weighed and cameras there monitor the entire property. Trucks or vendors dropping off other types of garbage — construction material, for instance, or concrete used to build artificial reefs — are directed to specific areas of the landfill.

Off to the right of Mr. Stark, another hill was filled to capacity. And in the middle was a long low basin where heavy equipment shaped horticulture waste into Twinkie-shaped rows designed to allow the material to heat up enough in the middle to properly break down.

"Eventually this will be one big hill," Mr. Stark explained, with everything filled, left, right and center.

The 312-acre site started accepting solid waste in 1976. About 203,000 tons of it was disposed of in the landfill last year, while more than 711,000 tons were diverted for other uses or recycled.

In the mid-2000s, Collier projected the landfill would run out of room by 2017. Now that projection is 2070, a much longer time frame that leaves officials optimistic that changing technology could by then help them divert even more materials from any future landfill.

Two things changed. The landfill got bigger while the county aggressively expanded recycling efforts, doubling its rate of reprocessing materials in the last 12 years.

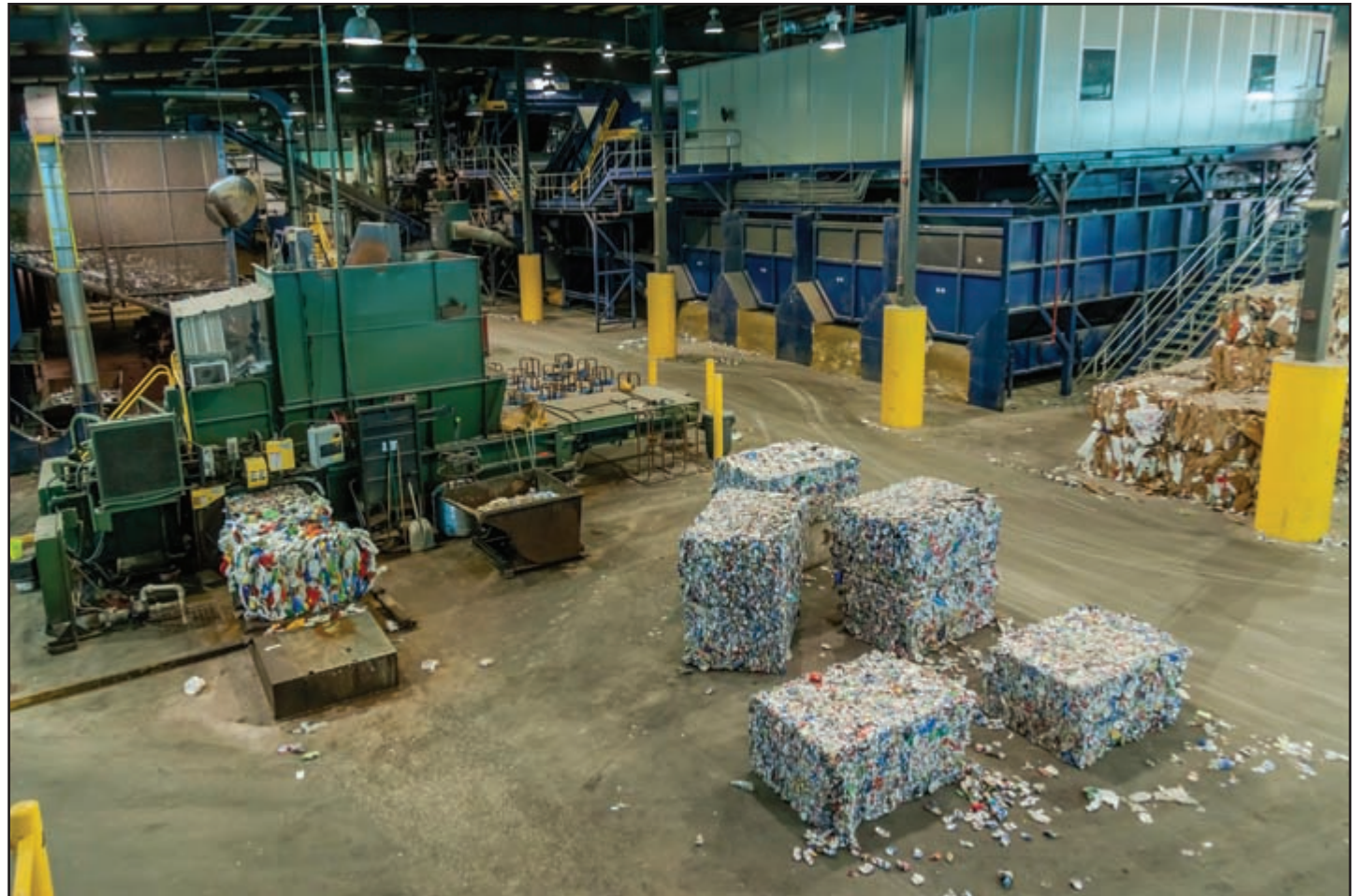
"We've had a dramatic reduction with the amount of material that's been going to the landfill," said Mike Bosi, planning and zoning director in Collier.

In general, residents in Southwest Florida have reached Florida's 75 percent recycling goal, while businesses lag behind.

Unlike people at home, businesses may hire their own private companies or haul their recyclables to Collier facilities themselves instead of using the county system. That makes it easier for some to cut costs or hassle by skipping that step and tossing everything in the dumpster, explained Mr. Bosi.

In Collier County, residents recycle close to 80 percent of their waste products; businesses, 41 percent.

Too, Collier was permitted to build its landfill close to double its current height, to 200 feet, or nearly 20 stories



Above: The interior of Lee County's recycling building where bales of aluminum cans sit in the foreground.



Left: A small fraction of the 900,000 tons of garbage collected in Lee County every year.



Below: A wide view of the Collier County landfill.

above the ground.

Elsewhere in the facility, wells collect methane gas that is burned by generators, creating enough electricity to power about 28,000 homes.

Storm water runoff or other liquid that seeps through the landfill called leachate, or landfill "gravy," is funneled out to a wastewater treatment facility.

And a hazardous waste facility processes millions of pounds each year; including 54,000 pounds of florescent bulbs in 2013.

The birds

The sky above the Charlotte County landfill is so full of birds as to actually seem ominous, as if Alfred Hitchcock were directing them. Most of the ground close to where the garbage is dumped, pulverized and buried is also covered by them: a field of seagulls here, another of blackbirds there. Most of all, there are turkey vultures. It's not uncommon for the birds themselves to attract wildlife photographers, confirms Richard Allen, the county's solid waste operations manager.

Driving a truck up a dirt road toward the spot where semi-trucks stop to unload non-recyclable garbage, Mr. Allen identifies a number of bald eagles among the crowd.

At the top of this section of the landfill, about 80 feet up from the ground, the high-rise condos of downtown Fort Myers are just visible on the southern horizon. Here, a bulldozer with metal cleats helps tear, shred and pulverize what the semi-trucks are unloading. A



TRASH

From page 9

fence behind it catches stray litter. With an estimated 163,000 residents, Charlotte has about half the population of Collier and a little more than a quarter the size of Lee. The facility processes some 350 to 400 tons of material per day that come through the scale house. The entire one-square mile property sits just past the Lee County line off U.S. 41. About a third is conservation lands. While some of the trash is buried, other items brought to the landfill are sorted into piles that can be reused for something else, such as tires that might be shredded to ultimately make a playground surface. Some debris is turned into woodchips and used during the rainy season, scattered on the landfill's muddy roads to give trucks easier passage. A new facility that opened about a month ago, run by a company called Synagro, mixes sludge with yard waste to create compost. The site also includes wells that col-

lect methane gas released by decomposing garbage. It is funneled to two engines that burn it and convert the energy to electricity, enough to power about 3,500 homes. An adjacent green hill, 130 feet tall, is a closed landfill that contains only construction debris. And about 190 acres are reserved for future expansion. That would likely include another landfill and possibly a larger waste-to-energy system. The current dump is projected to last until 2030, and look like a tiered cake once complete. But a recent switch to "single stream" recycling and developing technologies could help it last longer, officials say. Starting last year, residents were able to put all their recyclables in one container. A company that contracts with Charlotte County, Waste Management Inc., processes them at a facility in Tampa. "If the county and the citizens are doing a really good job on recycling that could extend that (landfill's) life," Mr. Allen said. Creating a new landfill will likely be necessary. But it's a time consuming, expensive process that can cost between \$500,000 and \$700,000 per acre to build, he pointed out. ■



Nature photographers come to the Collier County landfill to snap pictures of birds like this bald eagle. VANDY MAJOR / FLORIDA WEEKLY

THIS YEAR, WINNERS GET
THE SILVER METAL
2014 ATS 2.0L TURBO
 STANDARD COLLECTION RWD

MSRP \$36,105 • STK#14122 • COURTESY CAR

\$0 DOWN | **\$389** PER MONTH



ALL NEW 2014 CADILLACS COME WITH
CADILLAC PREMIUM CARE MAINTENANCE
 4 YEARS OR 50,000 MILES



*ADDITIONAL REBATES MAY APPLY FOR OWNER OF GM VEHICLES 1999 OR NEWER. CONTACT DEALER FOR DETAILS

Val Ward  Cadillac®
 DEALER OF THE YEAR 4 YEARS IN A ROW!

239-939-2212
 12626 Tamiami Trail South | Fort Myers
www.ValWardAutos.com
 Monday-Friday 8am-6pm, Saturday 10am-4pm, Closed Sundays



*36 Months, 10,000 miles. Total due at signing is \$0. Does not include tag and tax. Tax, title and optional equipment extra. Mileage charge of \$.25/per mile over 10,000 miles. No security deposit required for well qualified lessees. Restrictions may apply. Take delivery by 03/12/2014. Not available with some offers.