



Do You Need A BigBelly?



Solar-powered trash-compaction units are changing cities and parks

Besides *Sesame Street*'s Oscar the Grouch, I bet you thought you'd never hear of a talking trash can. But every day in Philadelphia, over 500 trash cans converse with the Department of Street's management team.

The BigBelly solar-powered trash-compaction units wirelessly communicate via a short-message service—i.e., text messaging (yes, even trash cans are texting). A central server allows managers to review the status of all BigBelly trash cans in real time.

"You can minimize the number of trips to remove the waste from the containers by knowing the status of each container," says Richard Kennelly, vice president of marketing for BigBelly Solar. "By tracking that data over time, you can optimize your routes to minimize the number of trips while maximizing your savings."

The math is simple: Reduce the number of times you trek out to empty trash containers, and you automatically reduce the gas, manpower and equipment maintenance it costs to remove the trash.

More than 500 BigBelly trash cans communicate with Philadelphia's Streets Department via short-message service to let them know when they are full.

“It is a cost-reduction tool; unlike a conventional trash can, it keeps the trash contained, and can hold five times as much in the same footprint of a traditional can,” says Kennelly. “This allows collection personnel to reduce their collection frequency by up to 80 percent. It is especially effective in high-volume areas.”

Philadelphia installed the BigBelly trash cans in April 2009 to replace 700 litter baskets. “Designed to transform the collection operations, in three years the savings in trash collection will pay for the BigBelly Solar trash cans,” says Kennelly. “It was less expensive for Philadelphia to replace all of their trash cans with solar-powered compactors than to keep doing business as usual.” In 10 years, the BigBelly will save the city \$13 million.

Sun The Belly

“The BigBelly units use solar energy to run a compactor that reduces the trash,” says Kennelly. “They don’t need full sun either. The BigBelly operates on about the same amount of energy as one Christmas-tree light.”



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Do You Need A BigBelly?

In Cincinnati, Ohio, the park board bought five BigBelly Solar trash cans to evaluate the amount of sun required, the potential for breakage and vandalism, and the effectiveness of the units in high-use areas. "We placed them in sunny areas, downtown next to buildings, under shade trees and in a high-demand location next to our Krohn Conservatory during the annual butterfly show that draws more than 80,000 visitors," says Gerald R. Checco, superintendent of operation, environmental and international affairs for the park board. "They worked well under every condition. We've also had no breakage or vandalism." The board then purchased five more solar trash cans and placed the new ones in the showcase locations, moving the older versions to new areas.

Reining In Trash

Similar to a mailbox or library book-return hopper, the BigBelly Solar trash



can opens via a pull-down hopper where a person places the trash and then closes the door. The trash then falls into a watertight collection bin. The enclosed system keeps the trash inside the container instead of blowing out, overflowing, or being knocked over. It keeps out bees and wasps, and larger pests, such as raccoons, skunks, brown bears and birds, that can create messes for maintenance crews.

"The concept of BigBelly is very simple and very elegant. We have 150 parks

and about 50 gateways, and most of them have from one to 80 trash receptacles. In total, we have over 600 trash cans, and picking up trash is one of our highest costs, and is environmentally taxing," says Checco. "Garbage trucks break down all the time, and use an extraordinary amount of fuel and oil. By decreasing the number of times we pick up garbage, we reduce not only the pollution, but can reallocate the money and time saved to other projects."

Back-Burner Project Gets Moved Up

At Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, land managers rented two BigBelly Solar trash cans, and deployed them in areas at Lake View and West Beach.

"Last year in our heavy-use areas, we started using solar-powered trash and recycling compactors," says John Kowllok, chief of maintenance at Lakeshore. "Before, people would toss their trash into the recycling container, but with the BigBelly, recycling has almost 100-percent

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compliance. It is really helping us out with recycling in the park.” The bottom-line benefit is less trash and more recycling, and the county picks up the recycling at no additional charge.

The Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore has since purchased three units and installed them at Lake View, Porter Beach and Bailly Contact Station. “We’ve been able to cut down the number of trips we use our vehicle and time we spend dumping trash,” says Kowllok. “We can then use that time to do more general maintenance and general preventative maintenance around the sites.”

The use of the additional rented BigBelly units has saved the National Parks Service on the number of staff needed for events—since the trash is compacted, the containers can be emptied at a less-frequent rate than that of plain trash cans.

For the BioBlitz, co-sponsored by the National Geographic Society, eight BigBelly units were leased to service the estimated 7,000 people in attendance,

including scientists and environmentalists from around the country. For smaller events—such as the Harvest Festival—two were leased.

Before You Belly Up To The Bar

Before you plead for funds to purchase BigBelly Solar trash cans, arm yourself with some data about trash-collection needs. “We had a student from the University of Cincinnati do a survey of all of the trash receptacles and quantify how much money and time we spent on collecting,” says Checco. “You cannot manage what you cannot measure. You need to know what you have, to know what you need to do to improve the system. In fact, we were surprised to find this was the duty we spent the most time and money on.”

Cincinnati’s park board then set out to determine how to reduce the amount of time and energy workers spent on trash removal by coming up with a variety of solutions, such as the National Parks Service’s new carry-in/carry-out


policy, which makes visitors responsible for the items they bring into the park. However, due to the urban setting of the parks, the idea was dismissed.

Of all the ideas, the BigBelly Solar trash can was the best fit. The board is now in the process of applying for grants to purchase 200 BigBelly Solar trash cans with a wireless communication system to allow for the most efficient routes.

Is trash collection your highest hidden cost? If so, your park might benefit from a few sunny days and a BigBelly—or 200. **PRB**

Tammy York is the owner of LandShark Communications LLC which specializes in media and public relations for outdoor recreation businesses. Her book, 60 Hikes Within 60 Miles: Cincinnati, is available online and in bookstores. You can reach her at landsharkpr@yahoo.com.

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