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Landfill looks to crush waste

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City endorses new plan

Aspen City Council endorsed a plan Monday to implement a new fee that would be assessed during the building permit process and would pay for a program that grinds construction waste and could add an additional 15 years of life to the landfill.

The fee, which would be known as a solid waste impact fee, has already been endorsed by Pitkin County, and county solid waste manager Chris Hoofnagle is shopping the idea around to the city of Aspen, the town of Snowmass Village and the town of Basalt, all of which contribute to the landfill.

Demolition and construction waste make up 64 percent of the loads delivered to the Pitkin County Landfill, according to officials, who note the national average is 25 percent or less. As the construction materials can't be compressed into smaller volumes like soft waste that comes from people's homes, this large amount of construction waste threatens the already limited life of the landfill.

With this in mind, the landfill has been grinding construction waste since 2007.

Using a large grinder with a high torque and a low RPM, which can "swallow anything from a refrigerator to a railroad tie," the landfill has been able to reduce the volume of construction waste — often steel, wood, dirt and boulders — by 50 percent, Hoofnagle said. Once the grinder has done its job, construction debris is ground down into particles about the size of a human forearm or head, Hoofnagle said.

The remaining capacity at the landfill is approximately 3.5 million cubic yards. In 2007, the landfill collected 159,000 cubic yards of waste, 116,000 cubic yards of which was demolition and construction waste. If no grinding of the construction materials takes place, Hoofnagle estimates the landfill has about 15 years left. By grinding up the construction waste, that number could be upped to 23 years. A strategy that uses the ground-up waste to cover other trash at the landfill could further extend the life to 29 years.

But the process is expensive, with the grinder costing up to \$500,000 and two full-time workers required to run the system. While Pitkin County is committed to going forward with the program regardless, Hoofnagle is hoping the towns in Pitkin County will get on board as well. He has yet to present the proposal to Snowmass Village and Basalt.

Under the program, contractors would be required to pay an additional impact fee in order to gain their building permit. The fee would be based on the size of what is to be demolished or built in square feet, with the fee geared to extract more from demolition than construction, since demolition transfers more waste to the landfill than construction. The proposed fees, which are subject to change, are \$1.14 per square foot of demolished space and 27 cents per square foot of new construction. Hoofnagle noted that

the fees could be lowered if all municipalities participate in the program.

The program also encourages contractors to divert demolition materials away from the landfill, because contractors would be offered a rebate on the impact fee for the amount of materials they are able to recycle. This would be accomplished by offering the public up to a week to come to the to-be-demolished property and “deconstruct,” or take whatever materials they can, from countertops to window fixtures and beyond.

“There’s some pretty nice stuff in a lot of these places,” Hoofnagle said. “Since we’d be charging by the square foot to demolish, it might incentive us not to demolish as much.”

The additional fee for demolition might also lead to more usable structures being left intact that might otherwise be torn down, Hoofnagle said.

The council balked somewhat at the idea of having a public free for all to deconstruct homes, encouraging the landfill to explore a more organized deconstruction process.

Contractor John Olson, who addressed the council at the meeting Monday, said the impact fee and the rebate idea was a step forward because right now “there’s virtually no [economic] incentive for us to reclaim anything.”

Councilman Dwayne Romero, who is in the construction business, agreed with Olson’s assessment.

“Five years ago we didn’t blink an eye” at sending truckloads of useable materials to the landfill.

“Today that behavior has changed,” Romero said. “The industry has a long way to go on the issue of being better environmental stewards, but we are waking up.

“In my opinion it’s the only thing to be doing,” he said of the impact fee proposal.

Another facet of the landfill’s strategy is to use the ground-up waste as “fill cover” for the landfill. State landfill regulations require landfill operations to cover new waste on a daily basis. This is usually done with soil, which must be purchased or otherwise brought on site. But whenever possible the landfill uses ground-up construction waste in place of the soil, which further extends the life of the landfill.

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