

Recycle from A1

collecting. And we are allowing all individuals anywhere in Lane County to drop off with us — because we don't want to see recycling in a landfill."

As its own entity with liability insurance, EcoGeneration is able to sidestep county protocols.

"We did work with Lane County, though," Gardiepy added. "They know what we're doing."

EcoGeneration is building a grassroots service unlike any in the region.

Until two years ago, countries worldwide had relied heavily on China for their plastics recycling. A Chinese ban in January 2018 on the import of plastics, however, has forced government entities and local organizations to scramble for solutions as domestic plastics have piled up in landfills or get incinerated.

Gardiepy's program is unique in the county in that it's the only program that accepts significantly beyond the county's own community collection program.

"We make it convenient for people to recycle," said Gardiepy. "When you make it convenient to recycle, you get a bigger buy-in."

The nonprofit also guarantees recycling because it doesn't accept any contamination. Curbside pick-ups, on the other hand, have contamination issues which limit the efficiency of the endeavor.

"The human element of what we're doing is allowing a pure stream of recycling to go to a processor," said Gardiepy.

EcoGeneration mainly serves Cottage Grove, Creswell and Oakridge, but is receiving take-backs from people as far as Deschutes, Douglas and Benton counties. Gardiepy welcomes the additional traffic.

"Even if an individual has curbside that takes plastic, we still advocate that they come to us because I can guarantee you there is stuff we will recycle beyond what you can recycle in any curbside in Oregon," he said.

The take-back list is extensive and includes #2, #4 and #5 plastics, various personal care packaging, several kinds of health and nutrition pack-

aging, disposable razors, cigarette filters, block Styrofoam and HP Inkjet cartridges.

A full list of items and cleaning instructions can be found on the EcoGeneration website.

Coming out of the lockdown, EcoGeneration has even updated its list.

The most popular additional service has been the inclusion of #1 plastics for bottles, jugs and tubs, though this excludes clamshell containers, cups or to-go boxes.

"It's not a perfect stream, but it did add a lot," said Gardiepy. "It was actually the number one area we had complaints and so we finally got a solution for that."

Gardiepy is also personally pleased with the addition to the list of any lid or cap six inches in diameter or smaller.

"We pay for that. And we do that because it's actually a pet peeve of mine," he said. "I don't like small pieces of plastic in an open-air landfill where there's birds."

The nonprofit has also added writing utensils to its list.

"Pens, pencils, mechanical pencils, markers, highlighters, Sharpies — pretty much anything you can write with that you can recycle," Gardiepy said.

On top of these new streams, the nonprofit has upgraded its website with the aid of a community member, helping make the site more user-friendly and adding an easy-to-access donation button. Gardiepy is hopeful this will generate more traffic and funding.

"We're definitely in need of money," he said. "That's something that hasn't changed."

Increased Presence

Gardiepy is looking for donations as the EcoGeneration name grows in relevance throughout the area.

While the nonprofit was on an upward trajectory for its first six months of operation, the outbreak of COVID-19 changed the landscape, shutting down services for three months.

Lane County, too, put on hold its community collector program.

"They felt like it wasn't appropriate to have a bunch of community collectors collecting plastic during the stay-at-

home period," Gardiepy said.

However, as the nonprofit is able to operate somewhat independently, it is looking to the horizon and a possible expansion to other cities.

By weight, the organization accounts for 10 to 13 percent of #2, #4 and #5 recyclables in Lane County, Gardiepy said. EcoGeneration had collected 4,000 pounds of community collection recycling in the six months before the coronavirus outbreak — and in other streams it exceeded an additional 5,000 pounds.

Gardiepy's grassroots model, too, may serve as a template for recycling solutions more broadly.

"Recycling really needs to be ground-up," he said. "If you have people at a state level saying, 'This is what we're going to recycle,' they're only going based on what they're told. They're not going based on what they see. I have a much different perspective on waste and recycling than any legislator, and that's because I do this."

Gardiepy believes this insight is what can give grassroots organizations an advantage.

"And so ultimately when you go ground-up, you identify solutions to problems in real-time, not months later when there's a legislative session," he said. "The ground-up approach provides unique opportunities to recapture things that would never be recaptured curbside."

Grassroots efforts can also address issues particular to local ecosystems and land waste management systems.

"There are other programs we're not in because there's no

need," said Gardiepy.

Febreze, for example, he found was not a highly-used item in the area, so instead focused his efforts on developing service for #1 plastics.

"I don't think a legislative approach necessarily is able to do that because they do the one-size-fits-all box," said Gardiepy. "And each community is different."

For these reasons Gardiepy feels that his model is also translatable to other communities where local motivation to address recycling issues exist.

"The model I'm using is not one-size-fits-all, however, because we're capturing way more recycling than other models, I feel like it's worth investing in," he said. "If the county's and the state's approach was to invest in local communities to solve a problem and give them the resources they need to solve the problem, I think the problem would be solved rapidly."

Without permanent headquarters, though, the nonprofit is struggling to find ways to train volunteers. Even so, 16 volunteers have so far joined the organization.

Volunteer Kai from Eugene is friends with Gardiepy and helped transfer plastics at the take-back on Saturday.

"Even though there's only a few of us, we make a huge difference in keeping plastics out of the ocean and getting them recycled and reused," he said. "It's a good way to utilize my time as well."

Kai hoped to see an increased interest from community members in volunteering.

"There's a great need for people to participate," he said.

"There's always a need because it's our planet and if we all chip in we can make a difference together."

On volunteerism, Gardiepy said one of the best ways to get involved is to capture material listed on the nonprofit's website and bring it to one of the take-back services.

"Because the more we're able to recycle, the more we're able to make the case for federal money or for state money," he said.

He also added gathering recyclables in one's own neighborhood as a form of volunteerism in itself.

Currently, the nonprofit is driving to raise \$7,500 for operating costs and continuing its rate of service. Local funding would also give EcoGeneration standing in its request for bigger companies to do

their part, Gardiepy said, adding his appreciation for all the local support thus far.

"I just want to highlight that we're really appreciative of the support we've got from community members," he said.

Cottage Grove take-back services are the second Saturday of each month at the Cottage Grove Community Center from 1 to 3 p.m., Creswell take-backs are the third Sunday of each month at the Creswell Wellness Center from 1 to 3 p.m. and Oakridge take-backs are the fourth Sunday of each month at the Oakridge Industrial Park from 1 to 3 p.m.

More information about EcoGeneration can be found at www.ecogeneration.org or at the group's Facebook page titled "Recycling with Eco-Generation."



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