

Tahoe businesses turning food waste into compost

By Kathryn Reed

By separating out food waste for composting, Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe last year reduced the amount of trash it produced by 33 percent. Yes, the hotel's occupancy was down in 2009, but only by 8 percent.

David Hansen, director of engineering for the property, has been spearheading all things green at the Stateline area hotel. He is also the key to making Compost Tahoe a reality.



Other members of Compost Tahoe are Joanna Walters, Tom Wendell, Garry Bowen, Chris Taylor and Erik Taylor.

"Compost Tahoe has more of an educational piece to it," Hansen said of the local compost movement.

He would like more people to use compostable products, which are different than biodegradable.

According to Compost Tahoe's website, "Compostable: means an item will break down completely into soil, water and carbon dioxide with no leftover residue. Biodegradable: means an item will break down into smaller and smaller pieces."

Another goal is to get people to use the end product – the composted material as a soil amendment. Embassy does this.

For a while Hansen was making two trips a week to Full Circle Compost in Minden to deliver food scraps and other compostable material. With South Tahoe Refuse starting a pilot compost

program and businesses besides Embassy now on board, Hansen can let others do the driving.

Last week Zephyr Cove Resort joined the pilot program. Both Marriott properties on the South Shore are interested. Whittell High School may be another player.

“We are trying to reduce the amount of solid waste refuse we produce,” said Mark Smith, project manager and environmental steward with Aramark. “There are a lot of items that go in this besides just food waste and food prep.”

(Aramark owns the two paddle-wheelers on the South Shore, and Zephyr Cove Lodge.)

Locally, Aramark doesn't use many compostable products besides food. However, coffee grounds, eggshells, nutshells, tea bags without a staple, cardboard without tape, paper towels, napkins and shredded paper are all compostable.

One thing that makes Embassy unique is that it uses compostable plates, flatware and cups – so even more is going into its bin.

“We are using mostly recycled content material. We have not gone full-bore with compostable material. We thought this would be a first step,” Smith said of separating out food waste.

Just like what Embassy had to do, it is a matter of training employees to learn what goes in the compost container and what keeps going into the regular trash.



An employee at Embassy Suites separates food waste for composting. Photos/Provided

“In the bin is a bag that is compostable,” Hansen explained. That bag is then tossed into a dumpster just for composting that STR picks up.

“This is part of integrated recycling. A good amount of weight is in food waste,” said Jeanne Lear with South Tahoe Refuse.

Every city and county in California must divert waste from landfills by 50 percent. South Lake Tahoe has set a goal of 55 percent. STR expects to hit 50 percent when the Resource Recovery Center opens in April. Eliminating some food waste will help hit that target as well.

In the pilot program that started with Embassy in February, the garbage company wants to see how big of a route it could handle, how much compostable material properties will collect, what it’s like to take a front loader to the Minden facility once a week, and the benefits and drawbacks of the program.

Just like normal garbage, the amount of compostable waste will fluctuate with the seasons – another concern of the refuse company’s.

Lear said she envisions bigger properties participating in the composting program. Douglas Disposal, which the group owns in the Carson Valley, is looking at Walmart having a composting bin.

STR’s permit from the state does not allow it to compost on-site in South Tahoe. Residential compost pick up is not likely. Lear also pointed to the difficulty of collecting

compostable material at businesses in strip malls because of space, the greater potential to contaminate the compost bin, and logistics.

A definitive time line to know if the compost route is working hasn't been set.

The other part of the equation is with Full Circle Compost. If the goods being delivered by STR aren't actually compostable, there is no reason for them to keep accepting the matter.

But it's also possible to contaminate the plastic recycling program if large quantities of compostable plastic gets mixed in with recyclable plastic.

It's back to that education component. People need to know what they are using and what to do with it when they are done.

"This is a great for the community. It could make the South Shore sustainable powerhouse that it should be," Hansen said of the compost program.

Publisher's note: *Read Lake Tahoe News on March 30 to find out what compostable products are all about.*