

County Clean Sweep costs rising; donations sought

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, March 22, 2016 9:37 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson County’s Clean Sweep program keeps toxic chemicals, old appliances, electronics and all manner of hard-to-dispose-of junk out of area basements and landfills.

But the program is getting more expensive as certain places that used to handle specific types of waste have begun to charge more for their services.

Now the county Clean Sweep program is seeking support from area municipalities, organizations and private citizens so it can continue its mission of keeping these harmful items out of the local environment.

Sharon Ehrhardt, solid waste Clean Sweep specialist for Jefferson County, spoke before the Jefferson Rotary Club recently, sharing the program’s history and its current fundraising efforts.

She noted that Clean Sweep got its start in 1992 with the aim of getting agricultural chemicals out of the environment in the local area.

“Jefferson County supervisors thought this was an important goal,” Ehrhardt said.

The program has grown ever since, with increasing attendance at Clean Sweep waste collections, and increasing amounts of chemicals and other hazardous waste brought in — and thus kept out of the local environment.

In 1993, the county added household products to the collection, including insect killers, garden chemicals, old lightbulbs, used Christmas tree lights and household batteries.

Later, the county started to accommodate not only farms and private individuals who wanted to get rid of these items but also small businesses (called VSQBs for “very small quantity businesses”) for whom the disposal of chemicals was extremely pricey. These businesses then teamed up with the county to pay only state-contracted costs for disposal, as opposed to contracting individual with waste management companies.

Currently, Jefferson County Clean Sweeps serve around 20 small businesses and 15 farms per year.

“That’s actually less than in the past, because a lot of farms no longer do their own chemical spraying — that’s handled through co-ops,” Ehrhardt said.

The Clean Sweeps also serve around 450 households per year, about half of those repeat users and half of them new to the program.

“Considering that the county has a population of around 80,000, that’s less than 1 percent of the population,” Ehrhardt said.

In 2008, the county Clean Sweeps began collecting prescription drugs. Otherwise, people often wind up flushing their prescription drugs, causing them to enter the water supply, or else throwing them out where addicts can get ahold of them.

In the current drug epidemic, most addicts start their habits by taking prescription drugs, so these things, especially heavy painkillers, need to be disposed of safely and securely.

“The Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office jumped on the bandwagon and the program was in place within five months,” Ehrhardt said.

No longer do people have to wait for an actual collection; however, there are now collection bins in several area law enforcement departments.

“Now we have seven locations, including the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office and the Jefferson Police Department, and they’re open 24/7. Pills, tablets, capsules, vitamins, creams and ointments are all accepted, although rather than keeping pills in their original prescription bottles, they should be emptied into Ziplock bags and deposited that way.”

The Jefferson County Health Department supports this part of the Clean Sweep program.

Electronics have been a recent addition to the program, with these items being collected since 2005.

“Computers have a lot of dangerous components,” Ehrhardt said.

This part of the program has really grown in cost, however, she said.

“It cost us 35 cents per pound to dispose of these when the program first started,” Ehrhardt said.

Jefferson County soon was able to hook up with a local company that needed to turn in a million pounds of e-waste, so they volunteered to take on the county’s smaller amount of e-waste for free.

In the next year, that company volunteered to take responsibility for any old appliances the Clean Sweep program should receive ... also for free.

Unfortunately, that free option is no longer available.

Last July, the company announced it would charge the county 7 cents per pound for these pickups. Then it went up to 10 cents per pound. In February, the company announced it would be charging more for pick-ups, including a 14-cent-per-pound charge for CRT glass (as found in televisions.

“Since last July, we’ve spent more than \$52,000 to dispose of mostly old televisions, and the Clean Sweep program can’t afford it,” Ehrhardt said.

Extrapolating that number out over the rest of the year, that would total more than \$80,000, she said.

The money for the Clean Sweep program comes largely from the host fee pact the county has with the Deer Track Park landfill in Johnson Creek and the company that runs it, currently Waste Management.

The amount of money the county receives depends on how much total waste the landfill is handling. In the past, where more construction was being done in the county, that pact brought the county around \$110,000 per year. Now, it’s closer to \$60,000, Ehrhardt said.

The Clean Sweep program does qualify for some grants from the DATCP (the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection), but the amount of grant money it receives has gone down too, from \$42,000 to around \$25,000 now.

Donations round out the rest of the program’s revenue.

“Taking \$52,000-plus out of pocket for e-waste does not fit in our budget,” Ehrhardt said.

The Jefferson County Clean Sweep has a drug and chemical budget of \$65,000 per year, and last year, it went over that budget by \$11,000 due to increased costs.

The county had to dip into its reserve fund to cover the overages.

“The county has decided it can’t pay for this anymore,” said Ehrhardt.

Seeking support from area municipalities, the countywide Clean Sweep program sent out a letter to all of the county’s towns, villages and cities.

In response, the City of Watertown dedicated \$37,000 to the project. Fort Atkinson is in the process of determining a source for Clean Sweep funds, as is Ixonia, Ehrhardt said.

But many other municipalities have either not yet acted or have declined to set aside some of their funds toward Clean Sweeps.

“We were hoping a lot of towns and villages would consider joining our project, but their budgets are just as strapped as ours,” the Clean Sweep representative said.

Thus, the county’s Solid Waste/Air Quality Committee has announced that as of June 30, it will no longer pay for the recycling of TVs and monitors.

The county has set up a new fee schedule for its upcoming Clean Sweeps. While most items still can be disposed of free of charge, there will be new charges for electronic waste.

The county will charge households \$40 to dispose of projection TVs and \$5 to dispose of any type of computer monitor, for example.

The Clean Sweep program will host two events in the near future at Jefferson County Fair Park and one in the Village of Palmyra.

“Our biggest fear is that when people find out about the new fees, that they won’t act responsibly in how they dispose of these electronic items,” Ehrhardt said.

She said as awareness spreads about the toxic chemicals in both old-fashioned and newer televisions and computers spreads, the charges the county faces to get rid of these items are likely to rise. She advised anyone with old televisions stored in their basement to get rid of them now.

“There are about seven pounds of lead in each television, and these things need to be handled as hazardous waste,” she said, “and there are only a few places in the United States you can send these things.”

A furnace in India that has traditionally handled e-waste is down and might be closed within the year, she said.

Meanwhile, the amount of e-waste that is being disposed of in the local area has risen, Ehrhardt said.

“The county took in 700,000 pounds of CRT (cathode ray tube) glass in 2013 and a million pounds in both 2014 and 2015,” she said.

“If your TV has a rounded screen, it’s likely to be CRT glass,” she said. “That’s full of lead.”

That problem will continue until CRT TVs leave the waste stream.

“In Wisconsin, ACT 50 bans all electronics from being landfilled,” Ehrhardt said. “This is good because we don’t want hazardous materials in our landfills. But there are few options for proper disposal of these items.”

New TVs have their own hazards. LCD (liquid crystal display) TVs contain mercury, for example, and LED (light emitting diode) TVs contain gallium and arsenic.

On the positive side, a company in Whitewater is in the works that promises to take CRT glass and make it into tile. The operation, DP Electronic Recycling, is expected to be up and running in several months, Ehrhardt said.

Despite the rising costs, the county remains committed to keeping toxic chemicals out of the local environment by providing opportunities for area households, businesses and farms to dispose of them safely and at as low of a cost to residents as possible.

The Clean Sweep program now is looking for support from whatever quarter so it can continue this important program.

Ehrhardt recognized all of the county departments and committees that have helped with the process, along with all of the community supporters.

Regular hazardous waste collections will take place throughout the year, with hundreds of different substances accepted and numerous collection sites. For locations, times and additional information, people can check the website at www.jeffersoncountywi.gov/cleansweep.

Upcoming electronic/appliance/lawn equipment Clean Sweeps will take place at the Jefferson County Fair Park from 9 to 11 a.m. on two Saturday, July 30 and Aug. 20, as well as at the Village of Palmyra from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday, Oct. 29.

Accepted are air conditioners, dehumidifiers, exercise equipment, lawnmowers refrigerators, vending machines, car batteries, dishwashers, freezers, microwaves, snowblowers, wall ovens, commercial A/C units, dryers, grills without propane tanks, range tops, stoves, washers, water coolers, water heaters, computers, printers, TVs, monitors, cell phones, computer games and game stations, stereos, radios, metal lamps and all small appliances. (All gas and oils must be removed from vehicles prior to drop-off, and propane tanks are not accepted.

In addition, a tire recycling event has been set in conjunction with the 2016 Clean Sweep. This will take place from 2 to 5 p.m. Friday, April 8 and from 8 to 10 a.m. Saturday, April 9.

There is a cost for tire disposal to cover what the county pays to recycle them.

Tires less than 13 inches cost \$1 or \$3 with rims. Car and light truck tires cost \$3 or \$5 with rims.

Ag vehicle and semi tires cost \$13 or \$25 with rims, and tractor tires without rims only cost \$25 for front tires, \$50 for rear tires.

For information, people can call the Clean Sweep program at (920) 674-7430 or email at sharoneh@jeffersoncountywi.gov.