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CCCSWA Turns Commercial Food Scraps Into Electricity

By *Sophie Braccini*

Believe it or not, commercial food waste is the second largest stream of waste in our suburbs, after green waste. According to Paul Morsen, Executive Director of the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority (CCCSWA) it represents 19.7% of what ends up in the landfill. These are produced by restaurants, supermarkets (whether they offer catering or not), schools, retirement homes and more, and right now these commercial sites have no recycling obligation.

"We had been looking for a way to reduce this important stream at a reasonable cost," said Morsen, "in San Francisco this is done by the NorCal Waste Authority but at a cost that would be too high for our region." Then, during one of his professional meetings, the Director talked with one of his associates at the East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) and found out that the agency was running a digester that transformed the sludge from polluted water into electricity (capturing methane) and creating soil covering material, and that this unit was running under capacity.

Now if CCCSWA could transfer its commercial food waste to EBMUD, it would turn it into electricity and fertilizer as well. To that end, two things needed to happen: First, convincing the producers of the waste to sort it themselves, and then to find a place and material to grind the waste small enough for EBMUD to process.

CCCSWA decided to run a pilot of some 30 locations along highway 680, including one Lafayette location: the Duck Club restaurant at the Lafayette Park Hotel. "We thought our restaurants could sort at the source," says Morsen, "now we have more people ready to go than we can accommodate."

Everything in the kitchen of the Duck Club at service time has to be fast and efficient. If sorting trash between compostable and non-compostable items could be made here it had to be very practical and not add any extra tasks to the cooks. "I was aware of the recycling in the restaurant in San Francisco," says Lafayette Park Hotel General Manager Tony Eichers, "and as I was looking for a solution for us; I heard of CCCSWA pilot, it was a perfect opportunity."

The practical solution was found in the installation of tall green trash bins that sit by each workstation. "Our staff was very easy to train," says Chef Chuck Courtney, "first of all they all knew about recycling and were eager to contribute; we found the right ergonomics and the program has been running flawlessly." "The new bins improved my productivity," says young cook Joseph Zarati, "the height is better, it is very easy to just slide the scraps in." Another bin is located by the station where dirty dishes are returned, but there are rarely scraps to be had there.

The cost for CCCSWA is right too. "The charge for us is reduced," says Morsen, "so it is really a win-win solution." The tipping fee for waste is \$52.50 a ton while EBMUD charges \$32.50 a ton to dispose of the food waste. To that cost needs to be added the grinding and transportation, but Morsen does not anticipate an increase in rates.

The pilot will progressively be extended to all of the commercial clients of CCCSWA over the next year. "Commercial food waste recycling is a priority for Orinda and the entire CCCSWA," says Orinda Council Member Victoria Smith who sits on the Board of the agency, "we very pleased with the initial results (the pilot) and the growing interest in the program. I understand from the CCCSWA staff liaison, Bart Carr, that there is a waiting list of volunteer restaurants that want to

participate. The benefit to the environment is enormous; not only do we remove large quantities of food waste from the landfill, but we turn it into energy to power the EBMUD plant. In 2010, the pilot program should be expanded into the Highway 24 corridor into Lamorinda."

The biggest commercial food waste producer in CCCSWA territory is Saint Mary's College. Matt Carral, the Sodexo Director on campus, has expressed a great interest in participating; now CCCSWA has to figure out a route that will include the pastoral location.

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