



KENT COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC WORKS

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Contact: Steve Faber, communications and marketing manager, 616-821-8006

Kent County DPW's investments in Recycling & Education Center help increase recycling, reduce waste

Upgrades help put county on the map as materials management leader

Grand Rapids, MI – A slew of innovative technology upgrades and strategic investments are increasing the quality of recycling and reducing Kent County's reliance on landfills.

Kent County's Recycling & Education Center, operated by the **Kent County Department of Public Works** (DPW) has undergone numerous improvements since it opened in 2010 that make recycling accessible and efficient for Kent County residents. The latest installation of robots that use AI to sort materials is the capstone to years of investments that help improve recycling and decrease costs.

"We set a bold goal to divert 90% of trash from landfills by 2030, and the upgrades made in our Recycling & Education Center, as well as the upcoming Sustainable Business Park, are an essential part of reaching that goal," said **Dar Baas**, director of the DPW. "We have seen the harmful long-term impacts of landfilling, and the investments we make will help ensure we're protecting our land, air and water now and into the future."

The Recycling & Education Center is the primary facility for residential recyclables generated from homes in West Michigan and is responsible for processing more than 60 million pounds of recyclables per year. The materials are sorted and put back into the economy as feedstock for new products like cereal boxes, glass bottles, toys, packaging, clothing, park benches and more.

The installation of robots, installed with grant funding from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE), has helped improve the quality, efficiency and safety at the Recycling & Education Center.

The robots are just the latest in a series of new technology, including the installation of a new optical sorter and eddy current separator, designed to extract specific materials from the recycling stream. The optical sorter reads different types of plastic as they move down a conveyor belt and sorts the materials based on their grade, leading to more accurate identification of valuable materials so they can be put to better use. The eddy current separator captures non-ferrous metals such as aluminum or copper.

In recent years, the DPW also installed equipment that sorts paper cartons and corrugated cardboard that allows for the recycling of cartons like empty creamer, soy and almond milk containers, juice boxes, milk cartons and boxed water.

The DPW worked hard to ensure equipment was installed or upgraded in a way that would not disrupt recycling service in the county.

Upgrades made to the facility have resulted in the county being positioned to sort more material and divert it from a landfill. The upgrades have also resulted in fewer people being needed to operate certain functions at the Recycling & Education Center leading to overall cost savings.

Despite these improvements, recent waste characterization studies show the Recycling and Education Center is only processing about 25% of the available recyclable material in Kent County. Due to limited access to curbside recycling and low participation rates, more than 75,000 tons per year of recyclable material ends up going in the trash and ending up at the Waste-to-Energy facility or an area landfill. The proposed [Kent County Bioenergy Facility](#) will use technology similar to the Recycling and Education Center to extract much of that recyclable material that's ending up in the trash.

“The upgrades we’ve made to the Recycling & Education Center support the safety of workers at the facility,” Baas said. “Using the most innovative technology in our recycling practices, and with the upcoming Sustainable Business Park, we’ll put West Michigan on the map as a national leader in recycling, reducing waste and material management.”

On March 29, the state of Michigan enacted the new Materials Management Plan process which requires counties to update their solid waste management to focus on sustainable materials management approaches, such as recycling and composting instead of relying on just landfilling waste. Kent County will be required to map out how it plans to increase the diversion of waste from landfills. The Recycling and Education Center, Waste-to-Energy Facility and proposed Kent County Bioenergy Facility position Kent County to lead the state in materials management and provide solutions for neighboring counties.

Structural repairs to the Recycling and Education Center have also been completed after damage to the building last winter when a cardboard bail pushed through an exterior wall. The Recycling and Education Center also received a fresh coat of paint, exterior fencing and new blacktop cover and new wayfinding in the parking lot. Finally, the Recycling and Education Center received a new awning over the recycling drop off to protect users from inclement weather and making the drop off more visible.

The Kent County Department of Public Works provides municipal solid waste disposal services to ensure the effective removal, storage, and disposal of residential and commercial solid waste through various facilities and programs, including Waste-to-Energy, Recycling and Education Center, North Kent Transfer Station and South Kent Landfill.

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