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**Putting a crunch on garbage costs**

**BIGBELLY | Sun-powered compactors new to lakefront**

May 25, 2007

BY **ANDREW HERRMANN** Staff Reporter  
aherrmann@suntimes.com

Move over, wide bodies: There's a new BigBelly on Chicago's beaches this summer.

The BigBelly, a \$3,600 solar-powered garbage bin, periodically crushes the refuse inside. With fewer pickups required, Chicago Park District officials hope the solar panel-equipped containers will reduce trash collection costs and cut garbage truck pollution.

» Click to enlarge image



**Frank Amato of the Chicago Park District demonstrates the new solar trash can and compactor that will be used this summer on Chicago beaches.**  
*(Al Podgorski/Sun-Times)*

Twenty-five of the boxes will be anchored at four lakefront locations: beaches at North Avenue, 31st Street and 63rd as well as Queen's Landing near Buckingham Fountain. In April, the city's Streets and Sanitation Department installed three boxes downtown.

Already gobbling garbage in New York, Baltimore and Vancouver, the BigBelly Cordless Compactor was invented by James Poss of Needham, Mass., who got the idea four years ago after observing trash swirl around Boston streets.

While still a business school student, "I started pitching the idea of the can to students and professors. People liked it," said Poss. Garbage trucks, which get less than 3 mpg, idle about 70 percent of the time and cost about \$125 to \$150 an hour to operate, he said. The BigBelly, compacting the trash with 1,250 pounds of force, reduces pickups by half or more, he said.

**'Sticker shock'**

His firm, Seahorse Power Co., has sold about 500 of the cans, which are in use in 10 countries, he said.

"People get sticker shock" over the \$3,600 tag of the BigBelly, Poss acknowledged. (The plastic-lid cans used by the Park District cost about \$50 each.) However, he estimates the price is recouped, when compared with the maintenance costs of a regular can, in about five years.

Each BigBelly contains a 12-volt battery charged by the solar panels on top. A light flashes when the can is full; Poss said the next generation of containers will be able to e-mail when they need emptying. The 540-pound receptacles, anchored to a concrete pad, have never been stolen in other cities, in part, he said, because "there's not much value in them" for their electronic parts.

Park District officials hope the cans also will reduce the number of swimming bans -- about 70 last summer -- caused by garbage-eating

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birds and animals that defecate in the water and raise bacteria levels.

"Chicago's a windy city," noted Poss. "When the garbage goes [into a BigBelly], it doesn't come out."

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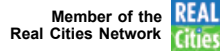
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