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# CITY'S GARBAGE GOES HIGH-TECH

Daley signs \$2.5 million deal to provide 400 solar-powered trash compactors downtown

FRAN SPIELMAN REPORTS ON PAGE 2



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# SUN COULD HELP CITY TO PICK UP GARBAGE

**BINS PURCHASED | 400 solar-powered compactors to be used downtown**

BY FRAN SPIELMAN

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Garbage collection on the streets of downtown Chicago is going solar and high-tech, thanks to a \$2.5 million purchase that could redefine the term "Big Belly."

The Daley administration has signed a contract with Massachusetts-based BigBelly Solar to provide at least 400 solar-powered trash compactors in the central business district, where pedestrian traffic is heaviest and trash bins need frequent pickups.

Each unit holds five times the garbage of a normal trash can and has its own built-in sensor that alerts the city when it's full. There's also an attached container for recyclables.

The sweeping purchase, most of it bankrolled by federal stimulus funds, follows a five-unit Loop test.

"This initiative will help the city continue providing services during these difficult economic times with our more limited personnel resources," Streets and Sanitation spokesman Matt Smith wrote in an e-mail response to the Sun-Times.

"Benefits are both economic and environmental. Since units are solar-powered, they don't need an external power source. They compact the trash, so Streets and Sanitation makes fewer trips to empty them. ... Trucks are out less, use less fuel and produce less emissions."

BigBelly Solar bills itself as the "world's first integrated" system that uses "renewable power and information technology" to dramatically reduce refuse collection costs.

The trash compactor looks a bit



The city has signed a \$2.5 million deal with BigBelly Solar to supply 400 compactors and recycling containers.

like a mailbox, complete with a pull-open door.

"The machine senses when trash reaches a certain level and triggers the compactor, which is powered by a solar-powered battery. There is also a separate container attached to the BigBelly that can accommodate recyclables," Smith said.

"When the unit is full and needs emptying, it sends a notification to the city via an automated site. There is also a visible indicator on the machine to alert staff that it needs to be emptied."

If the downtown experiment is half as successful as it's been in Philadelphia, Chicago taxpayers could save a ton.

In 2009, Philadelphia was emptying the 700 conventional trash bins in its city center 17 times a week, with 33 employees working three shifts.

One year later — after installing 500 solar-powered compactors

— collections had dropped to five times a week by nine employees working a single shift.

That saved Philadelphia taxpayers \$900,000, company officials said.

"Wireless communications capability ... allowed the city to better route and monitor vehicles and staff. Labor freed up by fewer required collections was used to staff the city's expanding recycling program," according to the company's website.

Chicago could use similar help to expand its stalled recycling program.

The Sun-Times reported last summer that thousands of blue recycling carts — with a price tag of nearly \$1 million — were stashed away in a Far South Side warehouse because City Hall bought them to make the citywide switch to curbside recycling, but ran out of money a third of the way through.

That left 359,000 households in the lurch, their only recourse being to take their recyclables to 35 regional drop-off centers.

Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel campaigned on a promise to cut the city's annual garbage collection costs by as much as \$65 million by implementing a four-step process that could end in at least partial privatization. He would begin by establishing a "benchmark" price-per-ton after comparing Chicago's collection costs to 10 major cities, he said.

Then he would give the city's 1,142-employee-strong, \$173.7 million-a-year refuse collection army a chance to meet those benchmarks. If that doesn't work, Emanuel said he would switch from a ward-by-ward to a grid or zone system of collecting garbage. If all else fails, he would implement a "managed competition" between city employees and private companies.