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Contractors nail down new methods to reuse construction materials

By Eric Young

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Recycling habits that are standard in many households could become more common in San Francisco's construction industry under a law being discussed now.

Just as glass bottles, newspapers and aluminum cans are recycled at many homes, wood beams, steel fasteners and sheet rock from building sites can be reused. Many construction companies are already recycling:

More than 700,000 tons of material get melted, ground or stripped for new use annually.

But San Francisco officials, wanting to keep more reusable material out of landfills, want the construction industry to do more. It is a ripe target:

Construction sites generate nearly half of the 1.8 million tons of waste generated each year in San Francisco.

Officials with the San Francisco Environment Department propose requiring construction and demolition companies to use only city-registered haulers to cart away materials from work sites. The city registration, officials said, would allow the city to keep close tabs on who transfers materials and make sure haulers are not dumping recyclable materials.

The proposed law is just starting to be discussed and likely won't go before the city's Board of Supervisors until next year. Should the proposal become law, it would build upon a law passed last year mandating recycling of construction or demolition debris from all city-owned buildings.

If San Francisco's recycling rate slides backward -- or if it has to buy more space in its landfill in the East Bay -- then the city could face millions of dollars in extra costs. "The city wants to preserve its (landfill) space for as long as it can," said Robert Reed, a spokesman for Norcal Waste Systems Inc., a major recycler and operator of San Francisco's dump.

A number of California cities have ordinances directed at reusing construction and demolition debris.

California passed a waste management act in 1989 that called for cities to recycle half their waste, including construction-related debris, by 2000. It was left up to cities how to achieve the goal. San Francisco reached that goal and then decided on a self-imposed goal of having three-quarters of its waste recycled by 2010.

Construction companies in San Francisco don't face penalties if they don't recycle. But recycling has become a widely accepted method of business.

"It's gone from being a tree-hugger thing to a board room thing," said Charlie Kuffner, an executive vice president at Swinerton Builders. Construction executives realize recycling makes business sense because of the market for many materials, he said.



construction recycling

Swinerton Builders, which has worked on many large Bay Area projects, recycles about 80 percent of materials from its job sites, company officials estimate.

The work Swinerton is overseeing on the Bloomingdale's project on Market Street helps illustrate how the sorting is done. The company has debris bins on site for wood, metal and other materials. Once those bins are full, Swinerton has them hauled to recyclers.

It can be difficult to recycle. Small job sites don't have space for several bins. In those instances, said superintendent Tony Williamson, Swbefore the next day's traffic starts.

While construction companies aren't mandated to recycle, there is an economic incentive, especially for certain materials. The markets for metal and wood tend to be strong, construction executives said, resulting in several hundred dollars for large quantities. Markets for other materials, like sheetrock or glass, can be more volatile.

Not all local construction companies arrange for materials to be hauled directly to recyclers. Some work with Norcal Waste, which built a sorting facility last year that can handle 275 tons per day of material. Concrete is sent to a crushing operation where it can be used in road construction. Metal is shipped to smelters. Norcal recoups the cost of sorting materials by charging construction companies to rent debris boxes.

