

Taking recycling one step further

Ingenious creation increases city's recovery efforts

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STAFF WRITER

What more appropriate way could there be to sort recyclables than to use equipment built from recycled materials.

That's precisely what's being done at Watsonville's city yard, thanks to the handiwork and efforts of one Jack Scroggins. The container repairman-turned-equipment creator has come up with a machine that over the last six months has saved the city about \$65,000.

The city operation has come a long way from the original plan for a countywide recycling program. The Material Recovery Facility was a very high-tech proposition, calling for 200 employees and bearing a \$60 million price tag. That proposal is sitting in a drawer somewhere, said Stephen Moore, Solid-Waste Division manager.

Instead, the city recycling program went from being unable to keep up with the work, to producing more quality recyclables with a higher market value using fewer people working fewer hours. The city's volume of residuals — material left over from the sorting process that must go to landfills — has been cut 75 percent, to between 3 percent and 4 percent of the recycling tonnage brought in. That's about half the national average, Moore said. He added that public education about recycling has played a large part in the program's success. It's all going to help the city meet a

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1995 state-mandated deadline for cutting landfill disposal by 25 percent. The current level is 11 percent.

Using an old conveyor donated by the Green Giant company, Scroggins scavenged the other necessary components and assembled the recycling sorter. The machine, manned by employees from the Skills Center, now handles 25 tons of glass, plastic, aluminum and tin containers collected weekly and brought to the Municipal Service Center on Harvest Drive. About 56 tons of recyclables, including the containers and chipboard, cardboard and paper, are picked up each week.

The huge savings being realized is the result of a combination of factors, not the least of which was the initial cost outlay. Moore estimated the total cost of the sorter Scroggins built was \$2,500. To buy a sorting conveyor more high-tech but which would do the same thing would have cost the city between \$20,000 and \$25,000, Moore said.

In addition, the people power and time necessary to do the work has been cut considerably.

When the program started up 20 months ago, the recyclables were being sorted on board the garbage trucks en route to the city yard. Moore said it took only two months into the program for everyone involved to realize it was a bad idea. There wasn't enough room on the trucks for all the material, it was taking two people to do what one could have taken care of.

"The theory was wrong to begin with... the basic assumptions were wrong," Moore said.

What Moore called the second-generation plan had everything brought in on collection trucks simply dumped onto a big table and sorted. "At that point," Moore said, "we knew we had to go to a conveyor."

Scroggins, a six-year employee, said he got the idea to use what was around to build, rather than purchase, a machine since "it's hard to get the City Council to give money for parts." He said he has no specialized training that would have helped him with the project other than having dealt with a variety of equipment during his years working on farms and

ranches. The 31-year-old Watsonville native said he used no drawings, just took what he knew and went at it, "making it up as I went along."

The conveyor was designed with the Skills Center workers in mind and after testing the operation's safety measures, it was put to work. It's been running 40 hours a week ever since, and is ready for semi-retirement.

It will be replaced by a second Scroggins creation, another container sorter, that's about two weeks away from completion. Scroggins has been working for a solid month on this masterpiece. An old carrot sorter sits at one end of the 40-foot conveyor, along which runs a metal cat walk. Scroggins said a blower will be attached to get rid of plastic. The \$3,500 machine will be able handle double the amount of sorting as its prototype, Moore said.

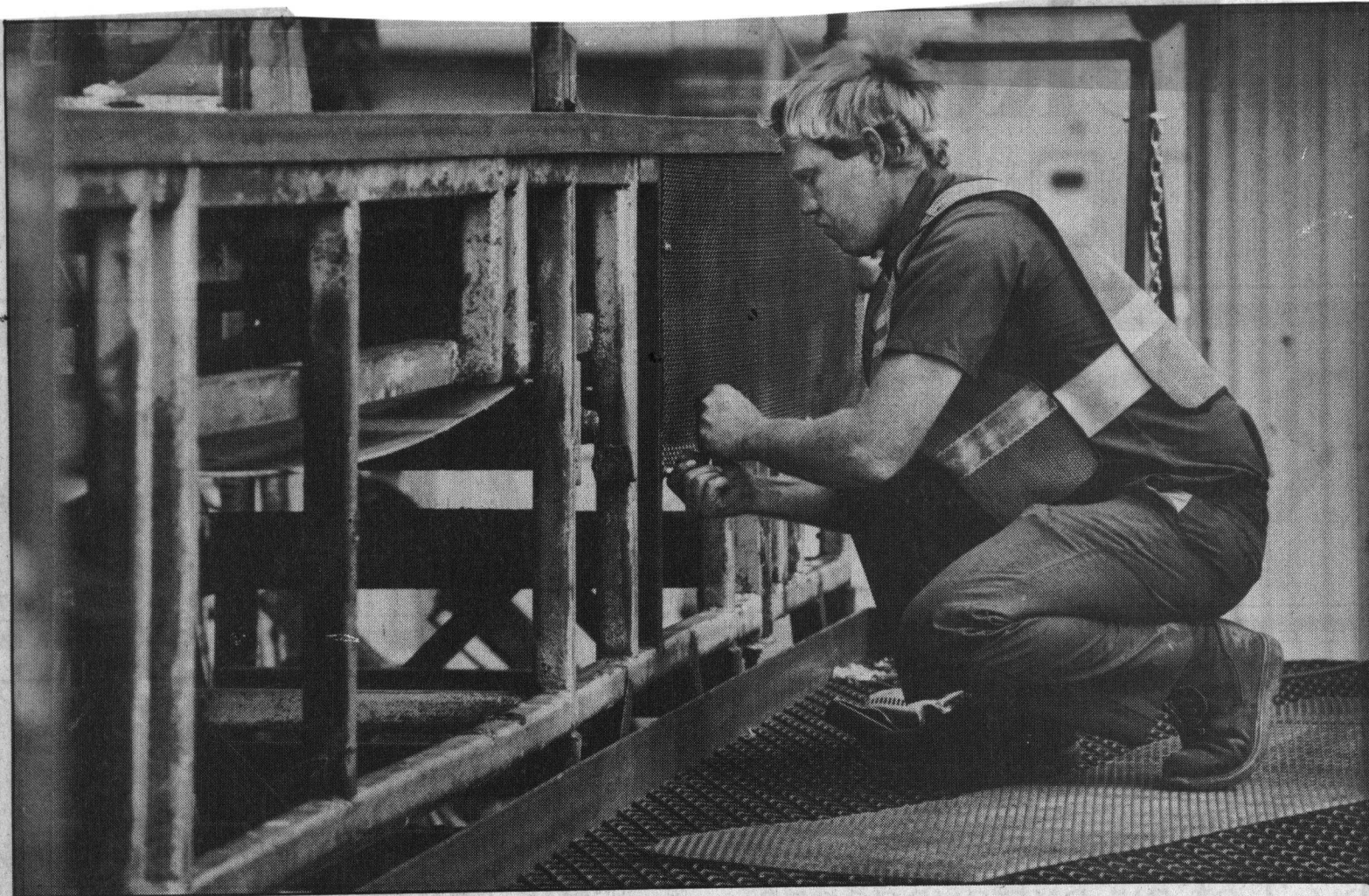
Moore said that, with his department's achievements as an example, an idea will be proposed to the city to contract with other south county communities to handle their recycling.

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REFERENCE



Kurt Ellison

Jack Scroggins works on the recycling sorter he built from donated and scavenged parts for the city.