

## Escazú Recycling Center Leads the Way

Mike McDonald - May 01, 2009

Second in a four-part series on waste management in Costa Rica

Directly across the street from the Escazú Municipality building is a wide, five-foot-tall, yellow container. Attached to the top of the bin is a blue sign with pictures of plastic bottles, newspapers, aluminum cans and paper cartons. It reads, *Reciclemos* or, Let's recycle.

The container is a sign of one of Costa Rica's healthier waste management plans.

In January 2002 municipal officials in Escazú, a suburb of San José, developed Recycle Escazú (Escazú Recycle), a community collection service for recyclable material.

Now in its ninth year, the plan is the oldest of its kind in Costa Rica and one of 10 municipal recycling plans being implemented in the country.

The collection service has recorded improvements in the amount of recycled material every year since its initiation. The municipality collected 169 tons of domestic recyclable material in 2002, a number that has climbed steadily to 726 tons in 2008.

Recyclable material is taken by the municipality to the privately owned Escazú Collection Center, where items are sorted and redistributed to private companies, where they are made into new products.

Collection trucks follow 10 different routes throughout Escazú. Trucks arrive every 15 days along each route. To facilitate the process, the municipality hands out calendars marking the dates to citizens interested in participating.

In 2007, the German government's cooperation agency GTZ established an office in Costa Rica to help develop municipal recycling plans. The program they established, the Competitiveness and Environment Program (CYMA), involves five Tico organizations that are assessing the needs of each municipality and helping them develop and implement solid waste plans accordingly.

Michelle Arias, the environmental coordinator for the Escazú Municipality, thinks the assistance of the CYMA program has improved their waste management plan.

Before the creation of the program, Arias admitted that Escazú's recycling plan was rag-tag at best. CYMA, she said, organized a team of municipal officials, representatives from the local Basic Health Care Clinic (EBAIS) and the Education Ministry to oversee and implement the plan.

We had the equipment and the workers before, but we didn't have a committee to oversee everything, Arias said. With all these people in place, the plan is more sustainable.

A survey done by CYMA in 2007 indicated that about 45 percent of residents participate in the recycling collection program.

The goal, she said, is to involve everyone, but admitted not everyone is accustomed to recycling; something the CYMA plan aims to change.

It's really simple to separate trash from recyclables, she said. Everyone can do it, but it's just a matter of time and education before we involve everyone.

So far, CYMA has organized integral solid waste management plans in 10 of Costa Rica's 81 municipalities. Of those 10, only Escazú and San Rafael de Heredia, a town located in the foothills above Heredia, north of San José, provided municipal collection services before CYMA began in 2007.

The Institute for Municipal Development (IFAM) is in the process of developing waste management plans in five new municipalities and will begin organizing five more by the end of this year, which would bring the total number of municipalities with integral waste management plans to 20.

Rafael Chinchilla, director of the CYMA program for IFAM, said the fundamental difference between previous collection plans and CYMA-enhanced plans is education.

It doesn't have to do with just providing a collection service, Chinchilla said. It has to do with changing minds, with educating people how to recycle and what to recycle.

As part of the education process, the program is posting bulletins and handing out flyers.

The Escazú Municipality provides free pamphlets that contain information about recyclable materials and collection route schedules.

Johnny Sánchez, an Escazú resident, never received a brochure but said that it doesn't take a college degree to learn how to recycle.

If the container is there and it says plastic, put plastic in it, the 65-year-old said. Sanchez added the municipality has worked well with the recycling program.

In addition to the free handouts, the CYMA program includes plans to help municipalities obtain essential equipment to maintain waste management programs.

Arias said the new Escazú waste management committee is working on a proposal to buy more collection trucks for the community and install a GPS system in the vehicles to help keep track of communities visited. The board will present the proposal to CYMA, who will decide how much assistance is actually necessary.

As for the cost, Escazú's normal trash pickup fee covers recycling collection. In 2007, residents paid a ₡3,600 (\$6.38) annual fee for the collection, which Sánchez said is very reasonable.

It doesn't cost a single colón extra, the almost life-long Escazú resident said. So help the environment. Pick up a plastic bottle and put it in the recycling container.

**Next week:** A look at liquid waste treatment

### 10 Municipalities With Recycling Plans

Alajuela

Alajuelita

Alvarado (Pacayas de Cartago)

Vásquez de Coronado

Corredores (Ciudad Neilly)

Desamparados

Escazú

San Rafael de Heredia

Santo Domingo de Heredia

Sarapiquí

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