

One man's trash



PHOTO: Tim Hull

Jason Tankersley, CEO of the Fairfax Companies in Tucson, has a Midas touch when it comes to other people's waste. His vision of reclamation is earning him respect as a leader in sustainability for the community.

By Tim Hull

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I'm sitting in Jason Tankersley's Mercedes in the middle of the Speedway Recycling and Landfill facility, talking about the sustainable economy. Outside the car's seemingly soundproof windows, hardworking guys in hardhats silently sift through the "waste" created by Tucson's construction and landscaping industries. There are mountains of cardboard; ruined cities of broken concrete; piles of shattered glass; mounds of broken drywall.

Tankersley wants it all. Bring it all to him, he says. He'll find a way to recycle it.

"I like the challenge," he says. "I do everything I can to find a home for all this stuff."

The 37-year-old Tucson native, CEO of the Fairfax Companies, was born into the trash game. In high school back in the late 1980s, he often worked for his family's landfill business. Even then, he says, it struck him as ridiculous how much useful material became waste just because it was dumped off at the landfill. Years later, when he inherited the business from his father, he began trying to change that.

In other words, he stepped, eyes open, into the nascent world of sustainable business, and he hasn't looked back. In fact, Tankersley has a knack for looking forward, especially when it comes to recycling.

He says he's tired of sending all the materials he recovers at his four reclamation facilities (three in Tucson, one in Litchfield Park) out of state and overseas to be recycled. He sees reclamation and diversion - taking one man's trash and turning it into another's useful product - as an ideal way for America to reclaim its manufacturing prowess.

"It boils down to the fact that we are losing our manufacturing jobs," he told me, as truck after truck filled with construction and landscaping leftovers moved across the facility's scale, and yellow spiderlike machines sifted through trash mounds.

"We aren't dealing with raw goods anymore - but we could be. Most of the cardboard goes to China; the paper goes to the coasts and out of the country; plastics go out of the country," he says. "When I started, there was almost no market for recyclables, and there was very little money paid for them. Arizona is still way behind the ball on

this; nearly 100 percent of this stuff is shipped out of the state."

The recycling industry can provide us with a chance to "make stuff" again, he says.

"And what are we going to do as a country if we don't make stuff?" he asks. "That model doesn't work."

Despite taking a hit in the recent downturn, Tankersley is obviously bullish on the future of sustainable industry.

"I'm very optimistic about the sustainable side of business," he says. "It's a big trend all the way from big companies trickling down to the little guys."

That's why he's set to expand his Speedway facility in the coming months to include a nursery and landscape supply outlet - providing one-stop-shopping for the Old Pueblo's always busy landscapers.

He'll supply aggregate made from crushed concrete, decorative rock, re-used tree planters, and more - most of it reclaimed and diverted. It's a perfect circle, as all truly sustainable models are: A landscaper brings his trash to the landfill to be recycled, and in the same place he picks up more supplies made from the trash he brought in before.

Tankersley calls the new venture "the first of its kind" in Tucson.

The downturn hasn't been easy on anyone, and it has been especially hard on the infant green economy. With less construction going on over the past couple of recession-hobbled years, there has been less construction waste to recycle, and Tankersley says he's always struggling to find new, cost-effective ways to divert the waste.

"We couldn't find anybody to buy paper and we had to let it pile up for six months," he says. "People just stopped buying recycled material." And for the big waste companies that contract with municipalities, it's still less expensive to truck Tucson's waste north to Phoenix and dump it in their own landfills instead of recycling, he says.

Currently, the Speedway facility is diverting about 20 percent of the material that comes in, but he's hoping to get that number up to 60 percent by January of 2011. Right now he employs between 12-18 employees at any one time at the Speedway facility, and he's hoping his expansion plans will allow him to hire at least 15 more Tucsonans.

But Tankersley's long-term plans are even more ambitious. He points to a huge pile of dirt on the edge of the Speedway facility that resembles the mine tailings in the Santa Cruz Valley. That's 15 years worth of dug-up landfill dirt, and as far as Tankersley's concerned, it's as good as a gold mine.

He plans to "mine" that dirt for left-over metals and plastics that can be recycled and, in the end, with all the broken-down organics in it, it'll make excellent top-soil to sell to landscapers, he says.

"Mining landfills is going to be very lucrative in the future," he says. "We want to showcase our facilities and use those to acquire others and extend the life of each landfill and create a valuable asset recycling all the materials that have been left behind. I think there's a huge future in mining landfills, and any responsible landfill owner is going to be doing it."

Like I said, Tankersley thinks a lot about the future. Maybe that's because he has two young kids to whom he's trying to pass on his rage for recycling. "I talk to them all the time about what they need to do to make the world a better place," he says. Or maybe it's because he's a smart businessman, and he sees, along with growing legions of others, that there's a lot of money to be made in trash.

I ask him what he would do if there were no obstacles - no technology-lag, no recession issues, no naysayers. He answers quickly.

"What I really want to do is build a state-of-the-art material recovery facility in Tucson where I can recycle every bit of waste we create here," he says. "It seems to me that if we create the waste here, we should recycle it here."

So far, Tankersley seems to be doing all he can to make that laudable goal a reality, and it's not like we're ever going to run out of trash.

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