2 landfills have different tales

By DAN ROBLEE (droblee@mininggazette.com), The Daily Mining Gazette  November 20, 2015

HOUGHTON - Houghton County is a rural area, and recyclable waste needs to be trucked long distances for disposal or sale. That's one of the most common reasons cited to explain why the county recycles less of its waste than most other Michigan counties.

Marquette County is also largely rural, and big recycling centers aren't any closer. But Marquette manages to recycle a far greater percentage of their waste. The biggest difference, said Copper Country Recycling Initiative members at a forum Thursday, is that Marquette owns its own county landfill, and has a clear economic interest in keeping waste out of it.

Generally, said initiative co-chair Suzanne Van Dam, it costs around $35 per ton to dispose of recyclables, about twice as much to landfill trash - and that's just in the short term. With long-term maintenance and environmental costs, she said, "recycling is exponentially cheaper."

Photo provided by David Hall

Seagulls crowd the K&W Landfill in Ontonagon County, along with paper and plastic many feel should be recycled, and food waste that could be composted but instead creates methane issues. The landfill is the final resting place for Houghton County's trash.

In Marquette, where the county and its taxpayers are responsible for the landfill's long-term costs, that equation makes promoting recycling an obvious choice for county leaders.

In Houghton County, she said, leaders have struggled to overcome obstacles created years ago that come between them and the long-term economic realities, both related to the county's Atlantic Mine waste transfer station.

The first problem, she said, is that Houghton County's transfer station, which opened in 2012, "wasn't planned with recycling in mind, in contrast with the county's (solid waste) plan, which said we should invest in recycling."

The second obstacle, she said, is the $1.64 million bond the county took out to pay for the facility. The plan was and is to pay off that bond with trash collection fees, meaning the county would have to find other ways to pay the bond - probably with tax money - if landfilled trash tonnage was reduced.

Even if it's cheaper in the long term, she said, county leaders have been slow to champion a new system.

The different situations have also led to very different resting places for trash that's not recycled, said initiative member David Hall.
Houghton's trash goes to the commercial K&W Landfill in Ontonagon County, which is owned by Waste Management.

"It charges by pound, and makes more money with more landfilling," Hall said.

Currently, he said, K&W is building a new trash-containment cell every seven years or so to keep up with demand, with each cell costing $4 million to build.

He estimates about half of what's dumped there could be recycled or composted.

"It's the organics that really create the problem," Hall said, noting those decompose and create methane gas and contaminated leachate, rainwater that has filtered through the trash, picked up contaminants along the way and needs to be treated before being released back into the environment.

"K&W collects 20,000 gallons of water a day (that) has to be run through wastewater treatment facilities," he said.

When a cell is filled, it's covered with soil, planted with grass, and pipes are installed to monitor methane indefinitely, Hall said.

At the Marquette County Landfill, where less is more, you don't see nearly as much paper, plastic or other recyclables, he said. The landfill also takes greater environmental precautions, covering trash piles with split tires and tarps so rain never gets into the trash and there's less dirty leachate to process.

They also use a machine that atomizes what leachate there is before it runs off and requires treatment.

These differences aren't driven just by circumstance, Hall said, they're the result of decisions made by political leaders following the direction of citizens.

"I hope you become involved," he said. "Everything is political and this is too."