It has been said that garbage and pollution are basically a waste of raw materials and energy. While some waste is harder to avoid than others, we can do a lot in our everyday lives to help stop waste and pollution. Recycling carpeting is one such way, thanks to a new program.

by George Zens

Discarded carpets and carpet padding contribute over 130,000 tons to Wisconsin landfill waste every year, equivalent to a carpeted area of more than 450 million square feet, or almost 12,000 acres (that's like covering Lake Mendota with shore-to-shore carpeting and installing a carpeted trail all the way around it). But since February 1 this year, a viable alternative is available. Madison-based Sorgenian's Floor Coverings has established a carpet recycling program, the only one in Wisconsin and one of only a handful in the whole country. So why are they doing it?

"Because we can," says Tom Sorgenian, the company president, but the simplicity of the answer is deceptive.

Their main problem was finding a company that could take the carpeting and recycle it.

"It was difficult to find someone who could take it consistently," says Sorgenian's CEO James Garner.

"Every time we thought we had someone, they dropped out. We could find sources for specific projects, like Monona Terrace, but nothing consistent."

Last year the pieces finally started to fall into place, in cooperation with Sternert, the flooring industry's commercial association, and CARC (Carpet America Recovery Effort), a joint venture between the carpeting industry and the federal government to keep carpets out of landfills. Specific recovery sites were identified throughout the nation that could either recycle used carpeting into new carpeting or use it otherwise.

"Two types of carpet fiber, nylon and nylon 66, can be recycled into new carpeting, and that takes care of about 80% of the total," explains James Garner.

But what about the other 20%?

"The rest is shipped to Indianapolis (to Covanta Energy Corporation), where it is burnt for energy, with all the appropriate filters and safeguards," says James Garner.

"We hope that eventually companies that make soundproofing materials or park benches will accept it."

"We have felt for a long time that recovering carpets is the right thing to do," says Tom Sorgenian. "It has been very frustrating to see dumpster after dumpster being filled up and hauled to the landfill."

Sorgenian's new guarantees all its customers that none of their old carpeting will end up in a landfill.

"We are now saving 750,000 pounds of carpeting from the landfill," says Tom Sorgenian. That is however only a fraction of the potential, as the numbers mentioned above indicate. At Sorgenian's they are not to go beyond recycling from their own jobs:

"In Madison alone, half a million pounds of carpeting are disposed of privately," says James Garner. "We also accept these third-party carpeting for a fee of about a dollar per square yard. That includes all recycling cost, including freight. The carpet has to be dry, clean and cut into pieces of about 10 feet by 10 feet."

Sorgenian's only charge third parties for recycling, but not their own customers.

"For now we have to pay to have the carpets recycled," explains James Garner. "We hope that will change in the near future, but for now the costs involved are considerable. We haven't changed our pricing to our customers, however. In fact, previously customers who wanted their old carpets to stay out of the landfill were charged extra -- we now absorb that extra cost.

Some of the cost also comes from the extra labor involved in recycling, like having to separate the carpet from the pad, and warehousing work.

"The support from the installers and the warehouse staff is crucial," says Tom Sorgenian. "They have to do the extra work, and so far they have been great about it."

According to Sorgenian's, their customers' reaction has been very positive:

"They love it!" says Tom Sorgenian. "There is a lot of enthusiasm out there."

"There is not money in it yet, but I am optimistic for the future. It is too early to say how it will evolve, but we expect a lot, which is why we are hiring more people and investing in more machines."

He has been recycling urethane foam padding from furniture, mattresses and carpets since 1992, so branching out into carpets, was natural.

"As long as we were picking up the foam padding, we might as well pick up the carpet, too. We've been wanting to do this for years, and now the technology exists to recycle consistently."

All the carpets that arrive at the Sorgenian facility in Middleton are laser-tested to determine whether they are nylon 6 or 66, or neither. They are stocked into categories until 40,000 pounds have been accumulated, enough for a truckload. Reynolds recycles about 200,000 pounds of polyurethane flexible foam padding per month.

"The padding is ground up and made into new. It is pretty much a closed loop."

He has been in the urethane business for 30 years, but discovered the recycling niche, when he noticed that European companies were importing their scrap for recycling in the United States, while U.S. companies were exporting theirs.

He hopes carpet recycling will take off in a similar manner.

"We have notified 200 carpet stores that there is a market for our carpet recycling program since January 22. So far the response has been good."

Resources:
Sorgenian's Floor Coverings
2001 Fish Hatchery Road
Madison, WI 53713
www.sorgenians.com

Reynolds Urethane Recycling, Inc.
8417 Murphy Drive
Middleton, WI 53562
Telephone: (608) 831-4244

Carpet America Recovery Effort
www.carpetrecycling.org