

City hopes 'BigBelly' means cleaner lakefront beaches

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In an effort to cut energy costs, keep beaches cleaner and reduce closings due to high bacteria levels, the city soon will install 25 solar-powered trash compactors at four Chicago beaches, Park District officials announced today.

The "BigBelly" devices have panels that recharge a 12-volt battery that powers the compactor's electrical motor. The containers will save energy by requiring fewer trash pick-ups, officials said, and are intended to keep beaches cleaner by being less susceptible to trash overflows.



Compact that trash

Chicago Park District officials show off new, solar-powered trash compactors at 31st Street Beach on Thursday. The devices will be installed at three beaches and a lakefront park to improve cleanliness and reduce bacteria.

*(Tribune photo by Nancy Stone)
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The compactors will be installed in the next two weeks at lakefront beaches at 31st Street, 63rd Street and North Avenue, and at the Queens Landing park area east of Buckingham Fountain, officials said.

The beaches were chosen because they had some of the highest numbers of closings last year due to unacceptable E. coli levels, said Ellen Sargent, deputy director of the Park District's Natural Resources Department. "There is a correlation between the cleanliness of the beaches and E. coli levels," she said.

Officials imposed 70 swim bans at the city's 32 beaches last year due to high levels of the bacteria, an indicator of other pathogens found in human and animal waste.

Sargent said birds, specifically the ring-billed gull, are a major contributor to high E. coli levels. By keeping away nuisance birds and animals that are attracted to beaches for food and trash, city officials hope to keep down E. coli levels, she said.

The black metal BigBelly containers, which resemble library book deposit bins, can hold four to five times more garbage than the

regular 95-gallon bins currently used, Sargent said. When trash levels reach a certain level, an optical beam is broken, and the container compacts the trash by pushing it down and making space for more garbage.

City officials said the container's larger capacity and ability to compact trash will reduce the number of trips city workers will need to make to pick up trash.

"Given the current situation with gas prices, it's an appropriate time to look to alternative for the park," said Greg Crowley, a spokesman for CEG Industrial Services, which distributes BigBelly trash containers in the Midwest.

The containers cost \$3,600 each and are manufactured by Massachusetts-based Seahorse Power. Hundreds of BigBelly trash containers are used in Queens, N.Y., and in Boston, Crowley said. A regular 95-gallon bin, by way of comparison, costs \$500.

The compactor motor can operate for up to two weeks on just four hours of sunlight, Crowley said. He said its battery can be charged even during overcast days.

Also, starting Tuesday, the city's gull-chasing border collies will return to duty at Foster Avenue and 63rd Street beaches, which had the highest number of closings last year. One or two of the dogs and their handlers will visit the beaches daily to keep away nuisance birds, Sargent said.

City employees were busy this afternoon combing sand, removing storm windows on shelters and repainting benches in preparation for the beaches' official opening Friday. They are scheduled to be open daily from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.

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