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Civic Stadium introduces new composting and recycling program

ANNA WALTERS / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

BELLINGHAM - Before the introduction of a new recycling and composting program at Civic Stadium, crews armed with gasoline-powered blowers would spend about two hours cleaning up the popcorn, paper cups, pizza boxes and other trash left behind by fans after football games.

But thanks to new recycling stations at the stadium, about 85 percent of the garbage this football season has been either recycled or composted, said Heather Higgins-Aanes, environmental program coordinator for Bellingham Parks & Recreation.

The blowers are no longer necessary.



"What we're shooting for is the change in the social norm," Higgins-Aanes said. "It's an interesting thing in our culture. We have a sporting venue that is outdoors, yet the typical behavior of spectators is to take their stuff and throw it on the floor and leave it there."

The three big Bellingham high schools play at the stadium, as does Western Washington University. Of the nearly 6,500 gallons of waste generated by fans over this season's 13 games so far, about 68 percent was composted and 17 percent recycled.

The stadium's green efforts are part of the Toward Zero Waste program, coordinated through Bellingham nonprofit Sustainable Connections and supported by the city of Bellingham and Whatcom County.

In January, the city introduced aluminum can and plastic bottle recycling to Civic Stadium. Beginning with the first football game of the season Sept. 5, city officials threw fans a new recycling challenge: composting.

Four recycling stations are set up in the concourses with volunteers clad in bright yellow coats helping to guide fans through the new system.

The volunteers also rove the stands with toters at some games, collecting recyclables. Some even sort through the garbage before it is taken out.

"Sometimes, when you're digging in trash, it's not the most fun job, but when you see the end product - that there's tons of compost and maybe one or two trash bags for the night - it makes it all worth it," said Sara Southerland, an environmental education and outreach coordinator for the city parks department.

Rodd Pemble, recycling manager for Sanitary Service Co. that picks up the Civic Stadium trash, said his records show the trash reduction so far at 36 percent.

Higgins-Aanes said that the parks department doesn't have records of the trash generated at Civic Stadium for last season, but the discrepancy is likely because the trash bins are used for other activities at the Civic Athletic Complex.

So far, parks workers say fans generally have been receptive to the new system.

"I think it's been easy, but it's going to get easier the more people are educated," said Ty Foster, who attends his son's high school football games at the stadium. "We live in a beautiful place, and it kind of diminishes it when you look at the mountains and then look down and see a pop can on the ground."