

# Simply More Trash

By Paul D. Martin

**O**n campus taking out the trash is not as simple as it is at home. It requires the cooperation of students and faculty, the commitment of environmental services and yes of course, the largess of administration and finance to make it all happen in a timely fashion.

Even if we get our students and faculty to put their refuse where it belongs, in designated containers, not in the stairwells, and we get staff to empty them before they overflow, we still have a huge problem. The very containers themselves often are as much a part of the fire problem as their contents, especially those of nonmetallic construction.

Consider this fact: medium density polyethylene, the material of which most receptacles are made, has a fuel value something akin to gasoline! Yes, that's right; the trash container itself produces twice as many btu's as normal household refuse when they burn. What's more, once such polyethylene containers are ignited, they rapidly become flaming, flowing and spreading liquids.

So what's the solution? First of all, we can insist that all trash containers over 40 gallons have lids; this might discourage some of those potential firestarters out there on campus and in the worst case scenario, slow down the growth of a fire, hopefully long enough for evacuation to begin. The International Fire Code gives us some support on this issue as it states "Containers with a capacity exceeding 5.33 cubic feet (40 gallons)...shall be provided with lids. Containers and lids shall be constructed of noncombustible materials or approved combustible materials." (304.3.2)



Many might be surprised to learn that there are non-metallic containers on the market that are noncombustible. They even come with lids that automatically close if their contents ignite. To the extent that those of you reading these words are granted the authority to approve or disapprove combustible materials used in the construction of the above sized trash receptacles, I urge you to take a long hard look at this matter. Polyethylene construction might not be in the best interests of fire safety.

In any case, there is a proposal before the International Code Council coming up for consideration next month at the Final Action Hearings in Minneapolis that will mandate non-combustible materials or combustible materials meeting stringent heat release criteria (F41-07/08). This is worthy of our consideration and support. But regardless of the outcome, we need not wait for others to do our jobs for us. We need to always endeavor to operate at the level of our own perceptions. After all, who knows more about campus safety than us?

So, while many of you share horror stories of overflowing trash piles with me, and many of you speak of your constant battles waged in getting everybody to work together to manage the endless stream of waste in an efficient manner, more

importantly in a safe manner, in the end - one of the quickest, easiest, and most significant ways to increase fire safety in our waste operations may just be the trash container itself.

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