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Waste not: Arcata council member keeps his trash to a minimum

Allison White/The Times-Standard
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Every year, Americans throw out an average of about 1,600 pounds of waste per person, but at least one Arcata resident has tossed out only the barest fraction of that for nearly 20 years.

Michael Winkler only uses one trash bag every year -- totaling about 30 to 40 pounds, or about 3 percent of what most people send to the landfill annually, according to statistics from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Winkler has been dedicated to reducing trash since he worked with the Earth Day 1990 group and now his partner has decided to join his efforts and reduce her waste as well.

"For two of us, I've had to be very diligent about selected buying, buying in bulk and to find places where things can be recycled and to get things repaired," Winkler said.

Winkler's dedication to waste reduction is a part of why he is involved with the Arcata City Council, he said. He wants to make it easier for others to be low-waste producers.

"One of the reasons I'm in politics is so what I'm doing isn't just my own heroic effort, which is limited in its impact," he said.

A recent council agenda item reflected this -- the council approved its support of Extended Producer Responsibility and directed Mayor Alex Stillman to sign the California Product Stewardship Council's Pledge of Support, which other California cities and local governments have also supported.

Extended producer responsibility means manufacturers should be

accountable for how their packaging can be disposed of by the consumers who purchase their products, Winkler said. Manufacturers could take back packaging or make them recyclable.

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Winkler also requested that the city add a few more details to the pledge of support, including that manufacturers should also be encouraged to make products that can be either repaired or upgraded and to "stop deliberately making things obsolete as a marketing technique."

Winkler pays the extra cost of repairing and mending the items he buys, and also purchasing items that can be repaired.

He takes his shoes to a cobbler, torn clothes to a tailor and electronics to a repair shop.

What does make it into his trash are things that cannot be recycled or are past repair, such as clothes.

"Eventually if something wears out you can use it as a rag but it will eventually be something that has to be

thrown out," he said.

Even with the small amount of waste Winkler and his partner produce, they signed up for the waste pickup plan that collects trash every two months and recyclables every week. They don't need that much of the service, but otherwise they will have to drive to Eureka to drop off recyclables with the implementation of Arcata's new recycling program. Although the program received a late start due to manufacturing delays, city residents will be able to recycle more easily when the totes are rolled out, he said.

After about 20 years of making the effort to be a low-waste producer, Winkler has produced less waste in that entire time than the average American does in a year. The effort has become somewhat routine to Winkler but he hopes his efforts in politics and other avenues encourage others to follow his lead.

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