

New Alaska Waste Manager Coming to Kodiak

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

Come November Kodiak will have a new district manager for Alaska Waste. After three and a half years in Kodiak, current Manager Rick Vahl has decided to take a new job in Mammoth Lakes, California.

Vahl came to Kodiak right as the borough decided to switch to the controversial roll cart method of collecting trash. Vahl said he worked with roll carts in Anchorage prior to coming to Kodiak, but quickly realized it would be a different experience implementing them in a small town.

“It was difficult because I stepped into a situation where I thought roll carts made sense, it was the most convenient thing. In Anchorage where I was working it was more standardized allowing people to have the same size cart with attached lids. So it was a difficult challenge because it was so new to a community. And because it was a mandatory service, you had the controversial approach, you’re forcing people. So that was probably the most difficult thing. I don’t think it was more of the presentation how the contract worked out.”

Vahl said he still thinks roll carts are a good idea for Kodiak because it sets guidelines and expectations for being responsible with garbage.

“There are lots of ways to pick up garbage. And that’s what we’re good at as a company is picking up and transferring the garbage to a safe landfill spot. The roll carts just kind of provide the infrastructure to have a relationship with each customer and know that if someone is having a difficult challenge with it you can work one on one. And if I were to just compare it to our drop sites where we have roll offs, you don’t know who’s going there, when they’re going there, so it’s real difficult to have a connection with the community and really make sure that we don’t have the engine oil dropped off inside or the paint, or the doors are closed because bears are coming around.”

On the topic of bears, many complaints about the roll carts are that they might be a greater attraction for Kodiak’s bruins and more easily accessible. While complaints have been fewer this year, last year many borough assembly meetings were packed with community members complaining about bears getting into their garbage and describing neighborhoods as trash strewn war zones. Alaska Waste does have a bear resistant roll cart option, but Vahl said he isn’t sure it is the solution folks think it is.

The bear proof carts cost \$300 each, and weigh about four times as much as a normal roll cart. Purchasing them would more than likely increase garbage rates, and not everyone lives in areas frequented by bears. Plus, the bins are more resistant, but certainly not bear proof. Vahl said people would still have to be conscious of how they are

disposing their garbage.

"It's an option, we've done pilot projects in Anchorage and worked with the community and partnered with fish and game to see how successful they can be. And what you find, like all other things, is that if everybody doesn't do the right thing all the time, it's not going to deter bears, they still like attractants, so that bear resistant roll cart isn't really a solution to keep bears away, it's just kind of a way to lock it inside a plastic bin. So I think there are more creative ways to solve how we live with bears, because it's real important here in Kodiak. So how can we improvise the system a little bit, and tweak it."

Vahl will start his new job in early November, right as Kodiak's new district manager, Kelcey Daniels, will take the reins here.

Daniels will be transferring down from Anchorage, where he has more than a dozen years of experience in the garbage business. He has served as a supervisor for ten years, a safety manager for four and also worked the collection trucks early in his career. Daniels said he is excited to be joining the Kodiak community.

"It represents a challenge to me and that's something career wise I've been looking for, for awhile. And I think that this presents a challenge, I think it's definitely outside the normal box when it comes to community and trash and what needs to happen, what has to happen. And what needs to happen. Where that goes I don't know. I'm interested and I'm glad to be a part of the community, I'm looking forward to it."

Vahl said he and Daniels both agree that there is a lot of potential for the future of waste here in Kodiak.

"I mean it's a small town that doesn't grow as far as population, but as far as taking incremental steps to do three things: reduce, reuse and recycle. I mean if we could just take baby steps in that direction, we'll look back five or ten years and say, wow, look at what we've done. We're doing a lateral expansion of the landfill that's supposed to last 40 years, but what if we reduce, reuse and recycle and it lasts 70 years. That's the hope, that's the dream and I think that's the legacy that our company wants to leave, and I think the borough wants to do that, it's just how do we get there, and it's through small change."

Vahl said he will be back and forth between Kodiak and California in the next few months as he starts his new job and tries to move his family. Daniels' first day as district manager in Kodiak will be November 4.