# Bond Case Briefs

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## Phoenix's Quest to Turn Trash Into Cash.

As City Manager Ed Zuercher tells it, trash “is in Phoenix’s DNA.” From two guys throwing cans of garbage into the back of a truck to automated side-loading trucks to single-stream recycling, Phoenix, says Zuercher, has always been innovative in solid waste. Now the desert city has plans to take its long-running relationship with waste innovation a step further: It wants to turn trash into a resource.

That’s the tagline for the city’s new sustainability initiative, which calls for reducing the amount of trash sent to city landfills by 40 percent over the next five years. It’s an ambitious goal. While Phoenix was one of the first cities in the country to introduce single-stream recycling, it only has a 16 percent diversion rate — well below the national average of 34 percent.

In order to meet the ambitious target, Phoenix needs an ambitious plan. That’s where its Resource Innovation Campus comes in. As its name suggests, the campus will be a hub for waste innovation. The focus will be on what city leaders call the “5 R’s”: reduce, reuse, recycle, reconsider and reimagine. This might mean, for instance, turning a beer bottle into new glassware or compost into natural gas.

Construction on the hub is scheduled to start next year on 50 acres of vacant land in the southern portion of the city. Adjacent to a closed landfill, a transfer station and a recycling facility, the land will become home to an Arizona State University (ASU) research center and waste-to-products companies. With access to the city’s solid waste stream, these businesses will work with the university to create new uses for garbage. “We’re giving local researchers the tools they need to turn trash into cash,” says Mayor Greg Stanton.

In addition to the research and development campus, Phoenix is building a compost facility on the site, which will be completed and in operation by next summer.

Part of the incentive for creating the hub is growth. Like many cities, Phoenix is expecting to see rapid expansion in the next few decades. “With our population projected to double by 2050, it’s just not sustainable for us to keep burying trash,” says John Trujillo, director of the city’s public works department. “With this program, we are trying to create a circular economy. We want to create a system where the material gets used over and over again here in Phoenix.”

While still in the preliminary stages, the Resource Innovation Campus has already garnered a lot of interest. When Phoenix put out a “call for innovators” this spring, it received 117 proposals from 70 different companies across the U.S., Canada and abroad, including Sweden, Switzerland and the U.K. Perhaps the most important attention it has earned so far came in the form of funding. The Closed Loop Fund, which is composed of Fortune 100 consumer goods companies and retailers such as Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble and Walmart, will offer below-market interest rate loans (some as low as zero percent) to the businesses selected to be part of the campus. The group, according to Trujillo, is also interested in providing funding to help build the site.

Specialized hubs like Phoenix’s Resource Innovation Campus are becoming more and more common.

Milwaukee started transforming an old industrial area in the southeast part of the city into a center for water research and technology a few years ago. Charlotte, N.C., is working to be a clean energy hub. These hubs are largely modeled after university business parks. In the 1980s, North Carolina State University's Centennial Campus brought academics, nonprofits and businesses together to facilitate the interaction required to bring research breakthroughs to market.

For Phoenix, bringing everyone together in one place "creates an entrepreneurial spirit around garbage," says Trujillo. As he sees it, trash can become a valuable resource that encourages entrepreneurship, creates jobs, brings environmental benefits to the community, elevates the quality of life and creates alternative forms of energy. "Who," he says, "would have thought trash would be so exciting?"

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