

Recycled roofing from local landfill is reborn on road

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One man's rubbish is another man's road.

Last week, construction workers finished paving a two-mile stretch of Lindbergh Boulevard that was unremarkable in every way - save one. It was made with trash.

The segment, which runs from Ronnie Lane to Roxanna Drive in south St. Louis County, was paved with asphalt containing recycled roof shingles from a Valley Park landfill. It is the first state road in Missouri paved with such material and marks the beginning of what some hope will be a new age in recycling.

"We Americans are kind of fat and sassy," said Dale Behnen. "We won't change our ways until we get desperate and are forced to. That time is coming."

Behnen, along with her husband, George, owns Peerless Landfill, where the shingles were kept before their rebirth as asphalt. Seven years ago, as new owners, the couple realized that much of their landfill housed materials that could be recycled.

Missouri dumps almost 900,000 tons of reusable construction material a year into landfills, including wood, steel, cardboard and roof shingles. That pattern rings true at Peerless, where people annually dump some 37,000 tons of wood, 43,000 tons of steel, 5,000 tons of cardboard and 37,000 tons of roof shingles.

"This stuff takes up space, space we need, and it's a waste," Behnen said.

So the Behnens started trying to market the used construction material. The easiest product seemed to be the shingles.

Most shingles, like asphalt, are petroleum-based, so Behnen figured the tons of shingles they had amassed could be ground up and used in asphalt.

It wasn't a totally new idea. Several states allow road asphalt to include a mix of shingles scrapped by manufacturers. Several other states, such as Ohio and Maine, allow demolished shingles to be added to asphalt mixes.

"It only makes sense," said Joe Schroer, the Missouri Department of Transportation engineer overseeing the Lindbergh project. "It's good for the environment, it's cheaper for construction companies, and it works."

But the road from idea to reality was a long one. Construction companies did not warm to the idea. Nor, initially, did MoDOT officials.

The Behnens had to prove they could remove all excess material from the shingles, such as nails, plastic and wood. They also had to prove they could produce a product that was free of toxins, such as asbestos.

Eventually they came to the attention of Roger Brown, vice president of Pace Construction Co. Brown worked with the Behnens, using some of their shingle mixture to pave a couple of small roads in company developments.

Last Tuesday, it was Pace Construction that paved the portion of Lindbergh.

"I think it is only a matter of time before this becomes the norm," Brown said. "We saved 10 to 15 percent on costs by using the recycled shingles, and that means companies competing with us will probably have to start doing the same thing."

The Behnens sure hope so. But it took them seven years to get to this point, so they're not holding their breath.

"This will be the way things are done in the future," Behnen said. "There is no doubt about that. But it probably won't happen until my granddaughter is grown."

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