Bear Box Loan Program

Entrant
County of Placer
Department of Public Works & Facilities
Environmental Engineering Division

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Target Population
Approximately 13,500 residential garbage customers in Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal Franchise Area 3

Cost per Applicant
$1,320

Approximate Budget
$132,000/year
No net cost to County
Executive Summary

An increase in recent years of garbage related human-wildlife encounters in the Lake Tahoe region of Placer County prompted staff to survey our garbage customers in 2014; 67% of the respondents had such an interaction and most were associated with garbage that wasn’t stored inside a bear shed.

Locals say “a fed bear is a dead bear” because those that get into garbage are viewed as a threat to people and their property, and are usually killed.

County Code requires new residential construction to install bear sheds. However, only about 60% of existing residents have them, so we created the Bear Box Loan Program to help fill the gap and create an incentive for the approximately 5,400 residents who don’t have a bear shed, to install one.

The Bear Box Loan program exemplifies the importance of increasing the awareness of an issue through a comprehensive campaign and providing a solution.
Research
Need for the Campaign

Issues with bears, and other wildlife, are a common and well known occurrence in the Lake Tahoe area. The local saying is “a fed bear is a dead bear” because bears that get into garbage become nuisances that can pose a threat to people and their property. Potentially dangerous bears are usually killed, so it’s crucial to prevent bears from getting into trash receptacles. Bear sheds help protect both humans and wildlife by containerizing solid waste in a manner that deters wildlife from scavenging.

To better understand the magnitude of the issue, Placer County staff asked our garbage customers in the Tahoe area to complete a survey with three options to respond – online, by phone, or by mail.

The questions were designed to provide information on the type and magnitude of garbage related wildlife encounters. We promoted the survey through garbage bill inserts (shown here), public meetings, internet, and press releases. Our franchised garbage hauler, Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal (TTSD) shared that approximately 60% of their 13,500 residential customers have bear sheds, leaving about 5,400 without.
Survey Results

The survey results indicated 67% of respondents have experienced wildlife encounters in their area related to garbage.

Of those, 69% noted the encounters were associated with garbage in cans not contained in a bear-resistant enclosure (bear shed),

and an overwhelming 88% responded that bears were the type of animal creating the problems.
Resources Used Prior to the Campaign

Placer County already had some programs in place in an effort to minimize bear and wildlife encounters. County Code requires that bear-resistant trash enclosures, commonly called “bear sheds”, be installed in certain new residential construction and remodels.

The County also requires bear sheds be installed when a residence has experienced repeated bear encounters, and TTSD works with commercial business to install dumpsters with bear-proof latches - replacing older models that don’t work as effectively.

Ongoing drought conditions for the past few years in California have exacerbated the issue of bears foraging for garbage in residential cans, since there has been reduced food in the wild. Placer County reminded residents, with a postcard, of the importance of using bear sheds (shown here).

The postcard also informed customers who to contact should they experience a human-wildlife conflict. When wildlife encounters do occur, residents typically call Placer County Animal Control, the Agricultural Commissioner, or law enforcement, who often rely on the Department of Fish and Wildlife to come and remove the animal.

Although some mandates were in place, the County realized these efforts leave one sector unaddressed – existing homeowners. There needed to be an incentive to make existing homeowners aware of the importance of, and encourage them to install, bear sheds.
Planning & Goal Setting
Target Audience of the Campaign

The Bear Box Loan Program is designed to target existing homeowners that don’t have bear sheds, and to provide a convenient and affordable way for them to get one.

As mentioned earlier, new residential construction permits require the installation of a bear shed. However, many existing residences in the Tahoe area don’t have them, and the cost to purchase and install a typical bear shed can cost upwards of $1,200. The goal of the Bear Box Loan Program is to promote installation of bear sheds by enabling eligible homeowners to receive a 5 year interest free loan from the County to assist with purchase and installation costs.

Information was posted on the Placer County website when the Board of Supervisors conceptually approved the loan program in April 2015, and three months later, when the Board unanimously approved the final details of the program. Since then, only nine months into the program, 36 residents have applied for the loan. Of those, about half have had their loans administered and their bear sheds installed, and the other half is awaiting warmer weather when the snow will melt and the new construction season begins.
SMART Goals & Objectives

The campaign goal was to make existing homeowners aware of the importance of installing a bear shed, and make doing so an easy and affordable process.

**Specific**
The goal of the awareness campaign targeted a specific audience – existing homeowners without bear sheds.

**Measurable**
This goal was measurable in that we were able to both quantify the need through targeted surveys and investigations, and measure the results via quarterly reports submitted by TTSD.

**Attainable**
To make acquiring a bear shed an easy and affordable process, any homeowner in good standing on their garbage bill is eligible for the loan program. With low payments of $22 added to each month of the quarterly garbage bill, the loans would be paid off in five years. Executing the program was also attainable for the County, in that we utilized an existing outreach budget, and leveraged funds by incorporating the messaging into regularly scheduled bill inserts and newspaper ads. Since the County’s upfront costs for the bear sheds are recouped through the loan repayments, the program is financially sustainable.

**Relevant**
TTSD was already working with commercial customers to improve their bins due to bear incidents, and residential encounters were increasing to the point where news stories regarding the issues (see Figure 1, page 7) were becoming more common – posing greater risks to humans and the bears themselves. Raising the awareness of the importance of bear bins was key to improving public health and safety and protecting wildlife.

**Time-bound**
It was important for us to present our program and contract amendments at one of the Board of Supervisors’ Tahoe meetings, with the goal of beginning implementation of the program before the snow came. However, while the Board meets twice a month in Auburn, they only meet four times a year in Tahoe. As a result, our timeline was based on bringing our proposal for the program to the Board at their April 2015 meeting, and being prepared to request our amendment to the hauler contract in time for their July 2015 meeting.
Bear Box Loan Program Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Tasks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>Management approached staff with request</td>
<td>Develop survey, create notification to inform customers, and include in garbage bill</td>
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<tr>
<td>June - December 2014</td>
<td>Conduct research</td>
<td>Develop program options</td>
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<td>December 2014</td>
<td>CEO direction to pursue loan program</td>
<td>Develop program details to present to Board of Supervisors</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2015</td>
<td>Board approves concept</td>
<td>Finalize program details and draft TTSD contract amendment to allow administration of the program</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2015</td>
<td>TTSD contract amended</td>
<td>Launch outreach campaign and begin program</td>
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Budget

As mentioned in the Attainability discussion of our goals, the County’s upfront costs are recouped through loan repayments, making the program financially sustainable.
Implementation
Overcoming Obstacles

Establishing a Budget
Early in the program development, the original concept was to offer a grant or rebate program. The first obstacle involved estimating the needed budget. This led to discussions regarding how much grant funding to provide (e.g. the full amount of the bear shed, or just part of the cost). Either way, a grant program could easily exceed our available funding (e.g. we learned if we provided a 50% grant and half of the 5,400 customers took advantage of the program, the cost would be $1.62 million – far exceeding available funding). Ultimately, to create a sustainable program, a no-interest loan program was created to cover up to $1,200 per homeowner, for purchase and installation of a bear shed, plus an additional 10% fee to defer TTSD’s costs to administer the program, allowing the homeowner to repay the $1,320 loan through a $22 monthly surcharge on their garbage bill for a term of five years. To control costs, the County initially set a limit on the available loans to 100 per year, and fixed the annual budget at $132,000.

Meeting Desired Timeframe
Once we confirmed the clear need for the program, we wanted to develop and implement it as soon as possible, and during the active bear season. In addition, we needed to amend the existing agreement with TTSD to allow for them to administer the loan. The need to amend the agreement accelerated our proposed timeline because we limit ourselves to requesting contract amendments to once per year. Therefore, we needed to develop the program concept, and have all parties agree to it, in order to present to the Board of Supervisors for approval. When we received approval of the concept at the April 2015 Tahoe Board meeting, we were directed to finalize the loan details and return to their July 2015 Tahoe meeting where our request to amend the contract was approved.
Determining Eligibility

Finally, and probably the most challenging obstacle to overcome, was determining who would be eligible for the loan program, and if customers credit worthiness should be considered. Other questions arose, such as:

“Should the program be available first come, first serve?”

“Should preference be given to low income households and, if so, how should income limits be set?”

“How will we require people to prove their income status credit worthiness without requiring submittal of sensitive, personal information and a lot of administrative effort?”

“Could the criteria be so stringent that it discourages or limits participation?”

We ultimately decided that the eligibility criteria should be simple, and as incentivizing as possible, since one of the main goals was to provide an easy, cost-effective solution.

With our program, any homeowner that wants a loan can get one, as long as they are in good standing with their garbage bill. This enables the eligibility to be confirmed in a matter of minutes, greatly simplifying the administrative process.
Opportunities to Improve

Working thorough the process of developing the campaign, we realized we hadn’t anticipated the level of close coordination that would be necessary for installation of the bear sheds. Responsibilities needed to be shared among the following entities:

**TTSD**  Staff would be required to oversee the installation of the bear sheds, ensure compliance with all applicable building codes, manage the loan payments and repayment from the County, and submit quarterly reports.

**Environmental Health**  Staff promotes and enforces the bear shed requirements and enclosure design.

**Planning Services/Building Department**  Staff enforces the building permits and bear shed requirements for new development and remodels.

**Public Works**  Staff enforces certain setbacks for bear shed installation and requires encroachment permits for any installations to comply with design plates for established rights-of-way.

Once we understood the requirements of all the applicable agencies, we incorporated them into the program, the outreach materials, and the hauler agreement. The collaboration also increased awareness among the various agencies and provided additional outlets for promotion of the program. As a result, the bear sheds are installed properly, resulting in improved efficiency and engagement for all involved.

**Implementation costs**

For the outreach campaign, we have an annual, fixed outreach budget of $5,000 that we utilized, which accommodates routine direct costs such as scheduled bill inserts, direct mailings, and newspaper print ads. There were many ways we leveraged existing resources and stayed well within that outreach budget. For example, the County has an
existing Survey Monkey account, so the initial survey did not have any direct costs, only the staff time to develop the questions. The County’s Public Information Office handles press items as a general service to County departments; so again, there were no direct costs for these services either. We had a blanket contract in place with a graphics design consultant, who was able to quickly design the direct mail pieces at a low cost. Finally, our in-house graphic design staff worked on the bill insert (shown here), which our hauler’s billing house inserted into the July 2015 garbage bill. As a result, the campaign was executed within budget.

Fortunately, the final implementation costs were lower than originally anticipated, primarily due to changing from a grant program to a loan program. A grant program would have required an ongoing budget contribution, which could have been difficult to sustain, especially if the County granted the full cost of each bear box. With a loan program that has a fixed annual County contribution, we know what our costs will be each year and there is no potential to overrun the budget. An additional benefit is that once people begin repaying their loans, the funding essentially gets cycled back into the program, making the program sustainable.
Partnerships & Collaborations
As discussed earlier, Placer County staff collaborated with many agencies to ensure that the installation of the bear sheds would meet various standards, resulting in a clear and simple agreement that is signed by both the homeowner receiving the loan and the contractor hired to install the bear shed (shown here).

Similarly, in the research phase, we solicited feedback not only from residents, but from the Tahoe area Municipal Advisory Councils, neighboring public agencies, local bear advocacy groups, and Placer County’s Environmental Health Department and Agricultural Commissioner, who respond to bear related calls and promote wildlife awareness. Through this collaboration, we were able to ensure that the information and education in our various campaigns is consistent, which has helped our campaign reach its awareness goals.

**BEAR BOX LOAN PROGRAM SUMMARY & INSTALLER RESPONSIBILITIES**

**Summary**
1. Homeowners contact Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal (TTSD) to apply for a bear box loan.
2. TTSD confirms resident is an Eligible Homeowner.
3. Eligible Homeowner then selects a bear box from the county’s approved bear box list (placer.ca.gov/barenclosures) and an appropriate licensed California or Nevada contractor (Installer) to install their selected bear box.
4. Eligible Homeowner signs loan documents and the contract. TTSD provides the homeowner a copy of responsibilities sheet.
5. TTSD provides a copy of the responsibilities sheet to installer. Installer also signs the responsibilities sheet.
6. TTSD provides an electronic copy of the signed promissory note and responsibilities sheet to Placer County.
7. Installer performs installation taking into account, but not limited to, responsibilities listed at right.
8. TTSD provides payment to the selected licensed contractor for up to $1,200.00, per the terms of the Agreement.
9. If an Eligible Homeowner installs a bear box that is more expensive than the maximum allotment, then the homeowner will be required to pay the installer any amount in excess of $1,200.00.
10. Eligible Homeowner repays loan via quarterly garbage bills as detailed in the Loan Promissory Note.

**Installer Responsibilities**
1. The Installer shall ensure that the bear box is on the county’s approved bear box list.
2. The installer shall ensure that the bear box installation meets approved county standards.
3. The installer shall ensure the bear box is installed a minimum of 15’ from edge of pavement to maintain minimum sight line visibility as required by Placer County Department of Public Works Standard Plate R-18 (placer.ca.gov/departments/communitydevelopment/eng/designplates)
4. The installer shall perform an Underground Service Alert prior to installation of the bear box to ensure the box does not obstruct, damage or affect in any way any existing underground utilities.
5. The installer shall work with TTSD and the Eligible Homeowner to ensure that placement of the bear box takes into account the TTSD extra distance charge and make every attempt to place the box within the no-chARGE distance limit.

**Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal**
645 WestLake Blvd., #5
P.O. Box 6479
Tahoe City, CA 96145
530.583.7800

Questions? Please call 530.583.7800
waste101.com | recycle@placer.ca.gov
How the Bear Box Loan Program is Unique

Specific to wildlife outreach, previous messages primarily promoted awareness and recommended the use of bear sheds. This new campaign provided an incentive for action. For many of our outreach campaigns in general, the key (and sometimes only) component is education - sharing information about our programs through bill inserts, flyers, print ads, etc. While these are good techniques to build knowledge, they are not an end, in and of themselves. For this campaign we developed a comprehensive “full circle” effort that involved research, targeting a specific audience, commitment to a schedule, development of a program that would solve that problem for that target audience, targeted outreach, implementation, and tracking and measuring the results.

Results/Evaluation
Response from the Target Audience

During the research stage, 226 people responded to the initial survey. As discussed earlier, we learned that the majority of respondents had experienced garbage related wildlife encounters, and that the vast majority of the encounters involved bears. The respondents also provided some valuable feedback in the written comments, such as:

“Bears know food is in our area and come…”

“If [garbage] bags are left outside, the bears will come because of the smell.”

“Bear [sheds] are an absolute bear saver!”

“My landlord will not buy a bear [shed]…”

“If people properly store trash in secure bear containers, there is not a problem.”

“I am interested in information on where to acquire and purchase wildlife resistant garbage containers.”

“Wildlife and trash is a human issue. We need to be pro-active on this.”
Following development of the loan program and implementation of the outreach campaign, 36 people signed up for loans in the first nine months. We anticipate seeing an uptick in applications and installations in the spring and summer as the snow begins to melt. A reminder about the program was included in the April 2016 garbage bill insert from TTSD (shown here), and additional outreach is planned for May and June in the form of press releases and newspaper print ads.

**Measuring Success**

To track and measure the results, as part of the program, the County requires TTSD to provide quarterly statements to the County. As mentioned above, 36 people have requested loans so far, and 18 have been installed to date. The remainder is, as mentioned above, waiting for the new construction season as snow in the Lake Tahoe area is prohibitive to bear shed installation. It is important to note that bears can hibernate 6-7 months of the year, emerging around April, so it is understandable that interest in the bear sheds may be seasonal, and slow down when people are not experiencing problems.

Since our hope is that we ultimately administer up to 100 loans per year, we will be reviewing our outreach plan to evaluate what changes can be made to generate additional interest. One idea to increase awareness in the coming months is to work with the Agricultural Commissioner and Environmental Health to create a fun and informative video about the importance of bear sheds.
By requiring quarterly status reports, we will be able to track the ongoing interest, and make any needed adjustments to the campaign, on a regular basis.

**Lessons Learned**

In developing this campaign, we learned that a more comprehensive approach, while taking more time and forethought, resulted in developing a program that addressed a specific community need, was easily attainable and sustainable, and allowed us to track and measure results.

We also learned that we can conduct a comprehensive awareness campaign on a relatively small budget by leveraging existing resources. It was helpful to have existing contract and survey mechanisms in place, so our timelines weren’t impacted by potentially lengthy contracting processes. We’ll be sure to maintain those resources moving forward.

For the program itself, we learned that simpler is better. As developed, our loan program has straightforward and simple qualification requirements, creating a greater incentive and making the program easy to manage.

**Replicating the Bear Box Loan Program**

Our neighbor to the east, El Dorado County, has inquired about information on our program, as they would like to replicate what we’ve done in their jurisdiction.

We’re considering creating a guidance document, providing step-by-step approaches for conducting a similar awareness campaign, in an effort to make sharing our successes easier in the future.

We hope that being recognized for our excellent Awareness Campaign will result in reaching similar communities with similar issues, nation-wide, and help them implement similarly successful campaigns.