



L.I.N.K. Magazine, founded in 2016, is a local lifestyle publication intent on bringing the best of area offerings to both locals and visitors alike. Published in La Crosse, Wisconsin, the print version of L.I.N.K. is freely distributed to hundreds of sites within a 30-mile radius of La Crosse.

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THE ONLY MATTRESS RECYCLER IN WISCONSIN

7 Rivers Recycling on Industrial Boulevard in Onalaska has the unique distinction of being the only mattress recycler in Wisconsin. In fact, it is one of a small number of mattress recyclers in the nation recognized by the International Sleep Product Association. In operation since 2014, 7 Rivers received the 2018 Sustainable Processor Award from the Wisconsin Sustainable Business Council.

7 Rivers co-owner Brian Tippetts estimates the business will recycle around 10,000 mattresses in 2019. The mattresses come from throughout the region, state and beyond.

“The biggest suppliers of mattresses are the city of La Crosse with their large-item collection in the spring, and Houston County with their drop-off sites and various mattress stores,” says Tippetts.

Individuals can drop off mattresses at Hilltopper Refuse and Recycling Services, Inc., located at W6833 Industrial Boulevard in Onalaska, between 8:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. weekdays and between 8:30 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Saturdays. The cost is \$15 per mattress. La Crosse County also charges \$15 for mattresses that are dropped off. Once mattresses are dropped off, they are added to a container that is taken to 7 Rivers to be recycled.

Tippetts advises consumers to ask retailers what they do with old mattresses that are hauled away after delivery of a new mattress. If they’re not sending them to 7 Rivers, they are likely being refurbished, not recycled. It is illegal to refurbish mattresses or sell refurbished mattresses in Wisconsin. And it’s kind of gross, when you hear about the potential for bedbugs, MRSA and various sketchy things you might discover in a used mattress.

“On Oct. 13, 2018, a woman from Rockford, Illinois, drove up here just to make sure her mattress got recycled. We get a fair amount of personal drop-offs,” says Tippetts. “She got on the internet and found us. She called some others who said they recycled mattresses, but she didn’t believe them.”

While 99 percent of a mattress can be recycled, the process is very labor-intensive. “We take a mattress and we fillet it like you would fillet a fish. We cut around the outside edges and pull back the layers,” explains Tippetts. “The top layer is the ticking or spread. Into it is sewn foam. We have a market for that. Underneath that is this polyurethane foam and we have a market for that. Below that is what is called a mattress felt. The industry does not have a market for that, but we are finding repurposed uses for it.”



Brian Tippetts (left) Larry Hougom (right). Photo by Bruce Defries.

The mattress felt has been used as a mover’s blanket, contractor’s tarp and as weed guard or landscaping fabric in projects throughout the region. The felt is available at the 7 Rivers facility, and it’s free. “We are trying to get it used, or else it ends up in the landfill,” says Tippetts.

Mattress springs are taken to a scrap yard where they are melted back into steel. Finally, the wood frame is ground up and used as mulch.

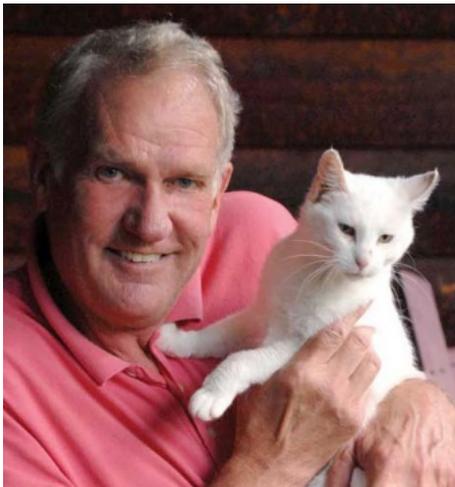
“By volume the things we recycle and have markets for are about 90 percent, by weight maybe 85 percent,” says Tippetts. “There are some weird things in there that we are struggling to find uses for.”

The weird things include a fluffy cotton batting and a coconut coir, both found in some older mattresses. Both materials are baled and kept at the 7 Rivers facility awaiting a future use.

Tippetts hopes the hundreds of bales of fibrous coconut fiber might find a use in the horticulture or nursery industry. “They are probably worth \$40 each if used in baskets [for plants], and we just want a couple bucks for them,” he says. “It is kind of word-of-mouth, we have this really cool stuff and we’ll sell it for cheap. We just don’t want to put it in the landfill.”

Keeping mattresses out of landfills is the primary mission of this award-winning recycler. Mattresses take up to 40 cubic feet in a landfill and have the potential to damage heavy equipment. They are also a safety hazard for landfill workers and a fire risk.

The typical charge to landfill a mattress in the La Crosse area is \$15—the same as the cost to recycle it. Tippetts would like to see that change. “It is expensive to landfill mattresses, and recycling them is the right thing to do. I would like to see landfills surcharge the burial of mattresses appropriately, which would drive the economics to recycle them. Do the right thing. Don’t bury recyclables.”



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