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Trashy habits cost Lincoln about \$500,000 a year

By Peggy Polacek

Because of a bad habit, the city of Lincoln spends about \$500,000 a year. That habit is littering.

Ginny Bauer, coordinator for the Lincoln-Lancaster Clean Community System, quoted this figure and explained why we should be concerned about the litter problem, especially now, during Keep America Beautiful Week, Sunday through Saturday.

The high costs of litter involve not only the cleanup, she said, but also the cost of reduced economic development. A clean, healthy environment promotes business.

Wilbur Dasenbrock, director of the UNL grounds department, said 7 percent of the department's time is spent on litter cleanup, while only 5 percent of its time is spent hauling garbage. He estimated that it costs one to one and a half cents per piece of litter for cleanup, and that the department picks up about 3 million pieces a year. Only about eight pieces of litter can be picked up in a minute, he said, explaining the results of some studies.

Bauer said there are certain social behaviors and attitudes that promote littering. People usually litter in areas that someone will clean, and where they feel no ownership to the property. She said stadiums and theaters are good examples of places where this theory holds true. People also will litter when there is already trash scattered in that area.

"It's a norm to litter," Bauer said. "Society encourages littering — it's accepted and almost expected."

Peter Bleed, an associate professor of anthropology at UNL and chairman of the anthropology department, said litter is a natural process of living since it is

generated by man's existence. Litter expresses a changing world, the affluence of a society and tells what a place is about, he said.

"Society makes use of containers to present materials that reflect values which are both economic and modern," he said.

Bleed explained this idea through an example of buying a hamburger at a fast-food restaurant. In order to eat the hamburger, it must be removed from the sack, the box and the paper it is wrapped in. All these pieces of paper are possible litter.

Dasenbrock said a high percentage of litter on campus is a result of enjoyment. Litter from vending machines and beer and pop cans cause the biggest litter problems on campus.

There are seven sources of litter, Bauer said. These include: loading docks, commercial areas, households, construction areas, uncovered trucks, pedestrians and mobile vehicles.

All these sources contribute to the litter problem, which Dasenbrock defines as "anything that detracts from beauty." He said beauty promotes feelings of good will, and too often this beauty is compromised.

"People need to feel good about their walk across campus," he said, "since the university is a reflection of high-quality learning."

Tyrone Harrison, an associate professor of life sciences at UNL, said litter is a reflection of the way people relate to the total environment.

"I see young people who litter as the future corporate polluters of the nation," he said.

Harrison referred to the problem as the "tragedy of the commons."

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