

## Diving

From A1

A company that rents Dumpsters in six Wisconsin cities, but not in Madison, has a page on its website devoted to Dumpster diving, which states it's not illegal in Wisconsin.

It advises people to read the signs around the Dumpster, and warns that if there's a "no trespassing" sign or if the Dumpster is enclosed by a gate or fence on private property, not to go diving.

Madison municipal code says it's "unlawful for any person to enter or remain on any property of another or to enter or remain in any building of another after having been notified by the owner or occupant not to enter or remain on such premises." The fine is \$500.

### Diving right in

In Dane County, Flannery said he has found that Middleton is the one place where there are lots of "no trespassing" signs. In the Madison area, he said, it's just a few businesses, including many Walgreens.

The benefits outweigh the risks, Flannery said, as he pulled a new dog crate from his storage unit in the basement of his Cross Plains apartment building. He estimated it retails for \$100.

He also recently found an aquarium and filters still wrapped in plastic. "I used to be in the fish hobby," he said. "This is a rimless, glass fish tank, brand new. If I can't sell it, I'll use it. Fish tank filters new are \$40 apiece."

Also in his locker were bottles of soda, collectibles for children, tote bags, strings of lights, throw pillows, blankets, seasonal decorations, artwork, dog food, cat litter, pet toys, dozens of picture frames with the glass still intact and the unopened coffeemaker, which is sold online for \$40.

Flannery said he learns the return policies of some stores from their online posts. There are stores, he said, that will get a case of something and if one of the products has broken open, the whole case is thrown away instead of just the open one.

"Here's a case of bleach," he said. "Why throw this away? It's bleach."

He said the box of six came from a Dollar Tree store and one was smashed in, but not leaking. He fixed it and salvaged all of them.

### Favored targets

Flannery, who works as an overnight manager at the Kwik Trip on Century Avenue in Middleton, and works a second job at the Pick 'n Save grocery store in Middleton, said he goes Dumpster diving two to four times a week.

He said his favorite spots are outside pet stores, party stores and dollar stores, but he also visits most of the big-name retail stores. He even visits thrift stores, and said he was surprised at what some of them throw away.

Flannery said he usually avoids stores that have trash compactors, like Walmart and Walgreens, and also stays away from stores that are open 24 hours a day.

So far, he's been caught twice, first by a Madison police officer. Flannery said he was with a friend and the officer asked what they were doing.

"We explained to him that we were Dumpster diving and just looking for some stuff that retail stores throw away," Flannery said. "He asked us if we were illegally dumping or anything of the sort. We said, 'No, we are actually taking things.' And he told us to have a wonderful night."

The only other time he was discovered was by a store manager at one of his favorite spots, a store where he estimates he's probably taken a thousand dollars' worth of goods from its Dumpster.

"She was very angry with me," he said. "But I remained level-headed and told her that it wasn't illegal for me to do this because there's nothing wrong with it. They have relinquished rights to everything that they throw away."

The manager said she was going to start locking the Dumpsters and told him what he was doing was "kind of gross." Flannery said he packed up what he had scavenged and left.

He said he went back a week later and the Dumpster wasn't locked, so he took about \$100 worth of stuff, including a new fan worth \$25.

Flannery said he's also found full, sealed bags of dog food and cat food still good for a year according to the expiration dates.

### 'Having too much'

He said he thinks there are a few reasons large companies are throwing out so much inventory. Often it's holiday stuff, and when the holiday passes they don't have the space to keep it until the next year.



JOHN HART PHOTOS, STATE JOURNAL

Travis Flannery views the contents of a retail Dumpster while searching for items to collect on the Far West Side of Madison.



New, in-the-box items retrieved by Travis Flannery from retail Dumpsters are stored in the basement of his apartment building in Cross Plains.



Items salvaged from retail Dumpsters by Travis Flannery are categorized and labeled in a storage locker of his apartment building in Cross Plains.



Travis Flannery displays an unused coffee maker retrieved from a retail Dumpster.

Same with seasonal items.

"And we just live in a society where we have everything available to us on demand, but that comes with a price of overproduction and just having too much," he said.

Flannery said now that he has stocked up most everyone he knows, he intends to start donating to shelters.

He said he has come across perfectly good salad kits, celery, tomatoes and grapes, perishable food that he has been able to take and eat when the weather was colder.

Feeding America, the largest food rescue organization in the United States, says that each year, nearly 40% of all food in America is wasted. It says that more than \$408 billion in food is thrown away each year.

Food goes to waste at every stage of food production and distribution with commercial food waste making up about 61% of it, according to the organization.

Last year, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources said that organic waste, such as food and yard waste, was the largest category of waste found

in landfills statewide.

Wasted food, which is formerly edible food that was spoiled or discarded without being eaten, was the largest component at 14.5%, according to a DNR report. Inedible food scraps, like banana peels, was the third largest at 6%. Combined, this food waste was double the percentage found in a 2009 Wisconsin landfill study.

Smithsonian Magazine reported that at least 85% of U.S. plastic waste went to landfills in 2021.

### Groups organize

Some nights Flannery said he's out Dumpster diving for up to seven hours, hitting as many as 200 Dumpsters. He said the number of stores that lock their Dumpsters is about 15%.

"I actually was just out last night into the early hours of this morning and came home with probably a couple thousand dollars' worth of stuff," he said in early May.

Flannery said he doesn't know if there's a community for Dumpster diving in Madison, but he has encountered a couple of others doing it.

A private Wisconsin Dumpster-diving group on Facebook had just 197 members as of Wednesday. "Dumpster Diving Tips and Finds," a private national group on the site, has 69,000 members.

One member asked in a recent post, "What do you have an unlimited supply of from diving? Me, toilet paper and body wash."

Some of the responses mentioned vacuums, body lotion, candles, condoms, cotton balls, dish detergent, razors, socks, DVDs, cosmetics, hair care products and meat.

"Dumpster Diving LIVES, SALES, TRADES AND CHATS," another national Facebook group, encourages its 6,700 members to "enjoy the overpriced products that stores toss away for less."

### Needless waste

Not everyone has a philosophical reason to go Dumpster diving, but some do. The anti-con-

sumerist Freeganism movement combats unnecessary waste by salvaging what others throw away and buying new as little as possible.

Freegan.info, founded in New York City in 2003, is designed to "create models of living that allow us to limit the control that corporations and money have over our lives, reduce our financial support for the destructive practices of mass producers, and act as a living challenge to waste and over-consumption."

Jessica Hay, 39, of Clanton, Alabama, said she has been Dumpster diving for about 20 years, but her reasons for doing it are more practical. After the death of her husband almost 11 years ago she said she had to be frugal, and it helped her survive.



Hay

It's still one of the main ways she supports her family. She also gives food from her dives to some members of her extended family. "None of them have jobs, don't even ask," she said.

Hay said she goes diving four or five times a month and often sells non-food items at an outdoor flea market.

She's in multiple Dumpster diving Facebook groups and said newbies are always asking the best times to go and the best places to go. No one can answer those questions, she said. "What you have to do is put in the work."

### Not a bad haul

Flannery said his biggest haul came about a month ago when he found a Dumpster half full with party supplies, including foil balloons and movie-themed posters from "The Incredibles" and "Finding Nemo."

"Probably \$10,000 worth of stuff in that one find," he said.

Flannery recently had a garage sale that netted about \$250, and set up a seller's page on eBay where he's made \$400 to \$500.

While scavenging, Flannery checks the recycling for boxes and bubble wrap and then doesn't have to spend money on shipping materials.

He goes mostly at night with a headlamp or early mornings because he works the overnight shift. He plans to get a step stool, but for now he said he puts his foot into a hole where the arm of the garbage truck goes and hikes himself up and in. Some Dumpsters aren't as tall.

Wearing older clothes and a worn out pair of tennis shoes, he stays fully covered, exposing no skin.

Sometimes he can't fit everything into his midsize car, a Chrysler 200, but one of the friends he often goes with has a Jeep Cherokee and they can fold the seats down. The value of what he finds helps pay for \$4-a-gallon gas, he said.

He said he's begun posting videos of his finds on Facebook and Snapchat to show people how it works and gets lots of people messaging him with questions. They like to see the things I find. They like to see the adventure part of it. They're intrigued by the amount of waste."