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KILGORE, TEXAS — National bag producer Pak-Sher is encouraging local schoolchildren to keep plastics out of the landfill and in the recycle chain with an incentives program that has exceeded all expectations, according to David Motley, Pak-Sher’s chief financial officer.

Tying in to Kilgore Intermediate’s theme, “Celebrate What’s Right,” Pak-Sher reached out with Kilgore Economic Development Corporation’s help to include the community in a “Keep it in Kilgore” campaign of turning used plastic bags into new bags.

KEDC presented Pak-Sher with a \$25,000 incentive check to reimburse the company for a portion of the new equipment needed for the project.

“This project is a multi-generational, hands-on learning experience melding economic, social and ecological behaviors,” said KEDC Executive Director Amanda Nobles of the business retention project. “It benefits PAK-SHER and their green marketing efforts, and teaches students that green is not only what’s right but also what’s profitable.”

The initial goal was to get students involved in a hands-on recycling exercise, Motley said. By partnering with school officials and enlisting the help of local economic development services, Pak-Sher formulated a plan that would allow the school’s 600 children to bring their family’s plastic shopping bags to the school, about a pound at a time (or 75 bags in a bag), in exchange for incentive awards such as a chance to win movie tickets every two weeks and a shot at a Kindle Fire at the end of the semester. Each of the 27 participating classroom teachers also received iPads for their part in encouraging the program.

Captured bags were then taken to the plant, turned into pellets, melted down and made into new black bags sporting the Kilgore Chamber of Commerce’s City of Stars logo, designed by local company Cypress Interactive. These bags were then sold to local merchants in a business helping business atmosphere where the students received extra incentive tickets for turning the black bags back in, noting a completion of the process. As a business incentive, those who purchased a case of the bags were recognized on the school’s electronic marquee. Motley said the school produced almost 2,000 pounds of recyclable material, enough to produce 50 cases of the new bags.

“At the time, I said, ‘This will be something that’s neat, but it’s probably no big deal,’” Motley said. “But I have been completely amazed at the enthusiasm of the kids.

I thought it would be a semester long deal and then fizzle out, but it hasn’t. The kids just kept collecting bags.” At the end of the 2011-12 academic year, KIS had collected more than 3,500 pounds (more than 262,000 bags).

In honor of America Recycles Day in November, Pak-Sher went a step further in including the students and gave nearly 300 fifth-graders a tour of the plant. Motley said the students were excited to see exactly what came of their BOBs (bag of bags).

“The key is to get these kids, in this generation, to recognize that this is not trash that needs to go in the landfill. That was the whole purpose,” Motley said. “If they could see how something that normally goes into the trash can could be converted to a product that they could put their hands on and do something with; it really grew much more than I thought it would and was received much better by the students than I thought it would be.”

Pak-Sher’s enthusiasm has also made a difference in its own business climate. The company received the Community Small Business of the Year award this past December for their commitment to the local East Texas community. It was presented by former Dallas Cowboy wide receiver and guest speaker Drew Pearson during the East Texas Small Business Conference in Longview.

“Obviously Pak-Sher’s not doing this for the profit. A 50-case job is a small job for us,” Motley said. “It’s a subsidized project, but it’s worth it. We are doing it again next year because we feel so strongly about it.”

“We love Kilgore, but our customers aren’t here,” Motley said of the almost 40-year-old company. “What this has done for us is it has expanded our concept of what we think we can do. There was always a hesitation to recycle bags because they’re more difficult to handle. We’ve decided we can do it, because we did it here,” Motley said. “The next step is to determine, ‘How can we do this more efficiently?’” So it was a step for us in the evolution toward being a better local member of society. On a bigger scale, “How can we participate more broadly in the recycling effort around the country?” We are all impacted by our resources.”