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TIME

WE ARE AMERICANS*

* Just not legally

We're some of the nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. Why we're done hiding. *By Jose Antonio Vargas*

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Trash Talk

Romney's stimulus bashing doesn't square with a green garbage-can maker's success

One BigBelly holds as much garbage as five regular municipal trash cans



THE FUTURE OF GARBAGE IS GREENER, cleaner, smarter and cheaper to pick up. And it's here, in the form of a trash can the size of a U.S. mailbox, pimped out with a solar-powered compactor that allows it to hold five times as much as a normal can, plus high-tech sensors that let sanitation workers know how full it is. There are 15,000 of these BigBellies deployed around the world, and they've already started to transform the ultimate dirty industry, keeping gas-guzzling trucks off the street while cutting costs for cash-starved communities. In Philadelphia, where BigBellies were painted in bright colors to look like cute trash-eating monsters, they saved the city nearly \$900,000 on collections in their first year. They've reduced pickups from three times a weekday to less than three times a week, and they've financed a new recycling program that's producing additional eco-friendly revenue.

A young entrepreneur named Jim Poss founded the company that became BigBelly Solar in 2003 because he wanted to do something green and profitable and the waste industry seemed ludicrously wasteful. Most garbage trucks get less than 3 m.p.g. and cost \$150 an hour to operate. Nationally, they burn a billion gallons of diesel a year and cost communities over \$50 billion. Poss was determined to break into the world of renewable energy, and while he thought it would take some time for solar panels and electric vehicles to compete with coal and gasoline, he saw instant opportunities for efficiencies in the world of garbage. "I don't need a subsidy to kill the business model of huge trucks driving around aimlessly," Poss says.

Killing a long-entrenched business model in an industry whose best-known entrepreneur is Tony Soprano isn't easy. Sanitation departments are not known for innovation or eco-sensitivity, and sanitation unions are understandably nervous about BigBellies: they've helped Philly reduce its trash pickup team from 33 employees to eight. And a single BigBelly can cost as much as \$4,000, a red flag in tough

times. Then again, it can cost as much as \$4,000 a year to service a regular metal can in a busy location, so BigBellies can pay for themselves in a hurry.

So what's the catch? Really, there isn't one. BigBellies help reduce our carbon emissions—and our vulnerability to price shocks—while shrinking bloated bureaucracies. They also help keep cities cleaner, eliminating overflows that attract rats and pigeons. They're made in America, support

presidential candidate, he's ridiculed the idea of government's "picking winners and losers" as Solyndra economics—the antithesis of free enterprise. But the truth is that the government has always played a role in nurturing industries of the future, from railroads to aerospace, from info tech to biotech. On June 1, a day after Romney visited Solyndra to criticize Obama's stimulus, another beneficiary of Romney's government largesse—the



ing factories in Vermont and Kentucky in addition to about 40 employees at the company's Massachusetts headquarters. BigBelly Solar's revenues have doubled almost every year, and the coming era of tight budgets should be good for business.

But if there isn't a catch, there is a twist. BigBellies are helping trim government, but government has fueled their growth. Cities like Philly; El Paso, Texas; Albany, N.Y.; and Everett, Mass., used cash from President Obama's stimulus package to buy BigBellies. The company also benefited from an early investment by the Massachusetts Green Energy Fund, a state-sponsored venture-capital fund designed to promote the clean-tech industry.

And yes, the Massachusetts governor at the time was one Mitt Romney. As a

Massachusetts solar company Konarka Technologies—declared bankruptcy and laid off its 85 employees.

Konarka wasn't Romney's only Solyndra, so he's taking flak for being hypocritical. But he shouldn't take flak for supporting innovative clean-tech firms that needed a push to compete with fossil fuels. And neither should Obama. The stimulus poured \$90 billion into all kinds of green-energy ventures so they could all fight it out in the marketplace.

There have been losers like Solyndra and Konarka and winners like BigBelly Solar. Apologists for the status quo will always claim that if change were really needed, the market would have already made it happen. BigBellies are a reminder: that's garbage.

BIGBELLY SOLAR