

Scottsburg parks and recreation supervisor Jerry Asher had a narrow escape early on Monday morning, July 9.

Asher normally begins his rounds early, and that morning was no different. He arrived around 7 a.m. to check Beechwood Park, the city's largest. According to Asher, he checked trash cans, gathering them up so trash collectors could come to one spot to get them. Then, Asher headed off to Lake Iola and the William Graham Park to perform similar tasks.

When he returned to Beechwood around 8 a.m., he found another trash bag had been placed in one of the park trash barrels. Aware that some people had been dumping their trash illegally in the park, Asher donned plastic gloves and opened the bag.

"I was going to try to find some trace of where the bag came from, since I knew it couldn't have come from people using the park," Asher explained at a July 10 Scottsburg Board of Works and Public Safety meeting. If such trash could be traced, its owner could be charged with illegal dumping and fined.

What he found, or rather smelled, was a strong chemical odor and light smoke coming from the bag's contents. "I backed off right away. I called the police," he reported.

Lt. David Hardin arrived quickly and agreed with Asher's conclusion that the bag's contents was a failed meth lab, a "shake and bake" lab in which meth manufacturers put the ingredients in plastic two liter bottles, shake them and leave them to "cook."

Lt. Hardin notified the Indiana State Police Meth Eradication Team. When team members arrived, they put on protective gear and began digging through the mess, which by this time had burned through the thin plastic of the trash bag and adhered to the trash barrel.

In all, 13 two liter bottles were found along with plastic tubing and the noxious, hazardous mess of chemicals. Asher was told that the mix could have exploded at any time.

The park supervisor was well aware of the danger the bag represented. "I just feel lucky it didn't blow up when I had my head over it," he said at the board meeting.

Scottsburg Police Chief Scott Zellers added that the bag could have also exploded when the city's trash crew placed it in the city truck or at its compactor, located near businesses on Scottsburg's east side.

"I guess the owners of the lab really didn't care who they endangered. They just wanted to get rid of it," Chief Zellers stated.

Since the "shake and bake" method is becoming more popular among those who construct the illegal labs, Zellers said people should be very cautious when finding two liter bottles filled with bubbling contents. "They can be put anywhere. I know we had a case at Beechwood a couple of years ago where one was in a truck and it blew up, burning the truck," he said.

The most obvious outcome of the July 9 incident is that city crews have removed trash barrels from Beechwood and other city parks. People who use the parks are being advised to bring a trash bag with them to put their garbage in and then take it with them as they leave.

"It's too bad we've had to take this step, but we need to protect the children and adults who visit our parks to enjoy themselves," advised Asher.