

Buncombe's Plans for Solid Waste

LESLEE KULBA ([HTTPS://TRIBPAPERS.COM/ARCHIVE/AUTHOR/LESLEE-KULBA/](https://tribpapers.com/archive/author/leslee-kulba/)) NOVEMBER 13, 2022

Organics Processing Options



Windrow Composting



Aerated Static Pile (ASP) Composting

Buncombe County will expand its composting program with windrow and aerated static pile methods. Screenshot.

Cassandra Lohmeyer, Buncombe County's recycling coordinator, provided an overview of the recent "Waste Characterization Study" conducted by SCS Engineers. The objective was to help the county glean information that would help extend the life of the landfill and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Estimates of landfill totals were extrapolated from hand-sorting through 45 samples, each containing 214 pounds of waste. A visual inspection was conducted for estimates of large items like white goods.

Lohmeyer reported that about 20% of the waste sorted was recyclable, with paper making up about 50% of the recyclables and plastics, 20%–25%. Lohmeyer said the county already had the infrastructure needed to handle these recyclables. Another 36% of the solid waste at the landfill was compostable, and there was a lot the county could do to make composting more convenient for residents and businesses.

SCS compared Buncombe County's land County, Colorado, and found the numbers similar. Boulder's better results were attributed to its "robust organics diversion" program. Lohmeyer also observed that Orange County and Boulder County funded their solid waste programs with general budget funds, while Buncombe County runs its solid waste operations as an enterprise fund.

At the close of Lohmeyer's remarks, Commissioner Terri Wells asked her to elaborate on the upcoming celebration. Lohmeyer replied that the following Saturday, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., the county would be celebrating the anniversary of drop-o composting at Lucy S. Herring Elementary School. Members of the public were invited to bring buckets to take free composting home and enjoy free snacks. Attendees would also receive composting totes to take home and keep on their kitchen counters.

Next up was Kristy Smith, the county's solid waste manager. She reviewed how the county had opportunities for curbside recycling through WastePro as well as drop-off acceptance at the landfill and transfer station. For food scraps, the county also had a few less-known collection sites as well as acceptance at the landfill. It even had the ability to recycle things like electronics, light bulbs, and tires. All told, the county's recycling programs diverted 16,840 tons of material from the landfill last fiscal year. For perspective, the county landfilled 321,917 tons last year, of which 97,683 were shipped to landfills beyond the county line.

In order to divert more, the county is looking into additional strategies for composting household and commercial waste. Smith said the county wanted to balance cost and environmental impact when selecting strategies. In-vessel and anaerobic digestion processing were deemed too costly. Windrow, which requires a lot of acreage and a lot of labor to keep aerating rows with the modern equivalent of pitchforks, will be pursued. In addition, the county will launch a pilot project that stacks compost into piles to lower the operation's footprint, and automatically injects air into the piles to reduce human labor. More low-hanging fruit include expanding the number of community compost drop-offs and creating a county campus compost ambassador program.

Another large source of divertible waste was construction. Smith said the increased volume of construction materials at the landfill reflected a nationwide construction boom, which she expected to continue. From 2020–2021, the tonnage of construction waste at the landfill increased from just under 40,000 to just under 50,000. Then, over the last year, the tonnage rose to just over 90,000. To deal with the influx, the county is exploring ways to improve efficiencies in how it mines garbage and possibly offer greater reductions in tipping fees for developers who presort the waste they haul to the landfill. "Throwing it back" on contractors, possible interventions include requiring landfill diversion plans for new construction and requiring contractors doing business with the city to recycle their construction waste.

To improve recycling of materials generated in large buildings, whether residential or commercial, Smith said the county should, "get on the front end of permitting," with actions as simple as establishing a set place for collecting recyclables, as is done with dumpsters. The county is also developing a recycling guide, but it needs multilingual assistance with its education and outreach efforts. Another strategic action might be to more strictly enforce the county's ordinance that already governs the recycling of cardboard. Two other general strategies include establishing more convenience centers, strategically placing and staffing them, and providing more regular curbside pickup service for special recyclables.