

Chatham County: A Rural County with a Big Recycling Effort

Residents of rural Chatham County are so anxious to recycle that Recycling Coordinator Judy Ingram has a hard time keeping up with their demands. "I can't move as fast as the citizens want," says Ingram. "Our recycling program is an example of a successful grass-roots effort. It's the residents who are pushing the government to do something about solid waste."

It all began in the spring of 1987, when the loosely organized Solid Waste Management Task Force, armed with environmental enthusiasm and a grant from the Governor's Waste Management Board, organized a workshop on recycling for more than 100 Chatham County residents. Chatham County Recycling has since grown from a one-Saturday-morning-a-month drop-off program into a flourishing project with four drop-off recycling centers and a full-time coordinator. Revenues from the sale of recyclables normally cover each month's operating expenses. From December 1988 to June 1989, the amount of materials collected increased by 42 percent, from 43,000 to 61,000 pounds. The program has expanded to include the collection of office paper and cardboard.

In the first six-and-a-half months of operation, the system diverted 133 tons of aluminum beverage cans, newspaper, and glass from the landfill. That's more than seven and a half pounds per county resident, but less than 2 percent of the waste buried in the landfill during the same time period. Still, Ingram says the program is successful. If volunteer support is any indication, she's right. A core group of 75 volunteers teaches recycling in the schools, mobilizes support in churches and civic organizations, patrols the collection sites daily, and searches for new markets for recyclable goods.

Despite these efforts, Chatham and other rural counties have a long way to go before

reaching the state's 25 percent recycling goal. Officials in rural counties say they have neither the money nor the personnel to operate extensive recycling programs. Since Chatham is sparsely populated, curbside collection of trash and recyclables would be cost-effective only in the towns and larger subdivisions in the county. For now, Ingram says the next step towards the 25 percent goal is to make recycling more convenient for participants. "Right now, I have about 5 percent of the people in the county participating," she says. "We will add one more collection site soon, and that might help." When the county consolidates its 60 unstaffed dumpsters into seven staffed centers next year, compactors for regular trash and drop-off facilities for recyclables will be added. Each home will have a site within six miles.

A recently implemented \$15-a-ton tipping fee at the Chatham County landfill provides added incentive for area residents and business to reduce and recycle their waste. The county commissioners, recognizing the strength of support for recycling and alarmed that the landfill has less than seven years of remaining life, have increased county funding for recycling by 62 percent, from an initial \$25,000 in 1988 to \$40,544 for the 1989-90 fiscal year.

Public outreach programs have taught school children to be "good stewards of the land," says Ingram. Last year, second grader Brian Craft claimed first prize in a poster contest with his slogan "Thumbs up for recycling!" One schoolgirl had to be reprimanded for climbing into one of the county's trash dumpsters to retrieve clean newspapers carelessly deposited by a newspaper carrier. "And the enthusiasm is contagious," says Ingram. "We're only making a dent, but we're doing something.... We saw a problem and jumped in in a low-tech way. While we're learning, people are learning to recycle. It is the change in attitudes that is most important."

—Amy Carr