



Talking trash: As Asheville grows, its waste does too

Posted on [April 22, 2021](#)

by [Molly Horak](#)



DIRTY WORK: Buncombe County residents sent over 184,000 tons of garbage to the Buncombe County landfill in 2020, reports Solid Waste Director Dane Pedersen. Photo courtesy of Buncombe County

In 2014, the city of Asheville made an ambitious pledge: By 2035, the amount of material going into the local landfill would be 50% lower than 2010 levels.

Less than a decade later, that goal has ended up in a dumpster. At the end of 2020, Asheville had increased its municipal city waste by nearly 2.5% compared with the 2010 figures, a far cry from the 15% reduction staffers had projected would be needed by this point to stay on track to meet the city's goal.



the year prior. Residents living within city limits contributed 24,208 tons that same year.

Buncombe County's municipal solid waste landfill was built in 1997 and, according to Buncombe County Solid Waste Director **Dane Pedersen**, has 20-25 years left before it reaches capacity. Waste is currently going into cell six of 10; he predicts that work to develop the next cell will begin in the next year. That's pretty good for a landfill built with an intended 30-year life span, he says.

The Alexander site is also home to Buncombe County's construction and demolition landfill, which had 19-24 years before it reached capacity at the time of the last annual survey, Pedersen says. The 2020 fiscal year saw 32,491 tons of C&D waste enter the facility from Buncombe County, a 12-ton reduction from the 44,779 tons that entered in 2017.

All signs indicate that the area's growth isn't going to slow down anytime soon. Making good on waste-reduction goals has become significantly harder with more people entering the equation, but local waste management teams say that just means it's time to double down on their efforts.

More people, more problems

More people moving to the area and more material to manage will take up more landfill space, Pedersen says. To track what's coming in, the county's solid waste team has asked commissioners for \$100,000 in 2022 capital improvement funds to conduct a [waste stream evaluation](#) this fall to assess everything entering the landfill.

"We know the region is experiencing historic growth, but we don't exactly know how that translates into our waste output," says **Cassandra Lohmeyer**, the county's new recycling coordinator. "The data will really guide us and be a more accurate compass with which we can develop new diversion programs."

Much of that historic growth is showing up in construction and home renovations, says **Morgan Alexander**, the vice president of Asheville's Consolidated Waste Services, a private waste removal company that works with commercial, residential and industrial customers. "It never fazes me to see something new being built on the next street corner," she says, noting the boom in apartment complexes going up throughout Buncombe County. "I only anticipate for that to rise."

Constructing a typical home can produce 10,000 pounds (or 5 tons) of waste material, according to a [June blog post](#) written by CWS. 2020 was one of the busiest years on record for the company, Alexander says, with operations growing by 6%.

Area population growth poses a host of other ecological problems to consider, says **Megan Davis**, the recycling and solid waste supervisor at Warren Wilson College. When people buy or build homes on the outskirts of town, garbage trucks have to make longer trips for collection, using more gasoline and generating more air pollution. When the landfill eventually reaches capacity, trash will likely be trucked to a location even farther away, increasing service costs.





Colleges step up

Area colleges and universities are working to meet their waste reduction goals through ambitious initiatives. In 2017, Warren Wilson committed to [diverting 90% of all waste](#) generated on campus from the landfill by 2032, with additional efforts to reach 100% zero waste as new technology becomes available.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, students and staff were diverting approximately two-thirds of waste from the landfill through campuswide recycling and composting programs. An on-campus Free Store offers donated books, furniture, clothing, cleaning supplies and decor to students, faculty and staff at no charge. Last fall, Davis and her team began creating a Hugelkultur, a layered mound of logs, half-finished and finished compost that increases the fertility of soil to grow native plant species.

Composting is also key to waste reduction goals at UNC Asheville, said **Jackie Hamstead**, interim co-director of the university's Office of Sustainability, in an email. Approximately 4,500 pounds of organic material are currently composted each week, down from a pre-COVID weekly average of 7,750 pounds.

Recycling expectations are also written into UNCA's construction guidelines, Hamstead added. Over 80% of construction waste generated during the recent build of The Woods, an on-campus apartment complex, was recycled or reused; the buildings are also LEED certified by the U.S. Green Building Council.

What comes next?

The findings from the county's pending waste stream audit will dictate the solid waste team's next moves, Lohmeyer says. Of the \$100,000 requested in the 2021-22 budget, \$40,000 will support a composting feasibility study to assess possibilities for future programs.





BOOMING: Construction in Asheville is booming, but new development comes at a cost. Building a typical home can produce 5 tons of waste material, according to a blog post by Asheville's Consolidated Waste Services. Photo courtesy of CWS

that data and augment it with new information from commercial businesses, other municipalities and unincorporated areas, he told the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners during a [Feb. 16 presentation](#).

Meanwhile, Asheville’s waste reduction goals — which do not take population growth into account — need to be revisited, says **Jes Foster**, Asheville’s solid waste manager since 2017. The city’s Office of Sustainability and Public Works Department have asked for \$300,000 in the 2021-22 operating budget to complete a long-range solid waste master plan. The study would revise and create new waste reduction goals, update programs for equitable service delivery and make fee structure recommendations, Foster says.

The city’s Sanitation Division has also asked for funding to add a waste reduction specialist to oversee recycling, composting and litter management initiatives.

Recycling also remains a focus for both the city and county. The city Sanitation Division encourages residents to use its online “[Waste Wizard](#)” tool to determine which items can and can’t be recycled; Lohmeyer is also working to educate “wishful recyclers” who put anything and everything into their blue containers about recycling contamination.

Curbside Management, which processes a significant portion of recycling from Buncombe and the surrounding counties, is ready and able to meet a surge in demand, says co-owner **Barry Lawson**. At the beginning of 2019, he and his wife, **Nancy**, completed a \$5 million addition to the company’s Woodfin facility and updated 80% of its equipment with newer automated models to speed up the sorting process.

Well-executed policies can be a main driver of waste reduction initiatives, says Davis of Warren Wilson, but all bold changes need to be paired with educational programs and individual accountability to cut down on single-use material consumption.

“We have to do something, now,” she says. “We don’t have any more time to waste. We have to really work together to fix this.”

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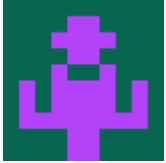
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About Molly Horak

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2 thoughts on “Talking trash: As Asheville grows, its waste does too”



Tamera Trexler

20 hours ago

Good article. To me it makes another point about whyv the proposed plans to develop Charlotte street is a bad idea. They want to tear down 13 Historic buildings and a restaurant and old growth trees and throw them in the garbage. Wasteful, spoilt , greedy behavior like this has horrible consequences for the planet.

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Maria C

2 hours ago

Is the transfer station at 190 Hominy or 24 Pond Road? I noticed what looked like a landfill near the river while driving south on McDowell. TRASH in ASH is a problem but the county's focus on new Green policies is reassuring.

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