

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

July 23, 2024

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Jeff Smithberger, Division Director, Solid Waste and Recycling

“Solid Waste – Where does it go?”

by **Rick Handford**

Dena Diorio introduced Jeff Smithberger, the director of Solid Waste and Recycling, a division of the Mecklenburg County Land Use and Environmental Services Agency. He is responsible for managing the short and long-term priorities associated with solid waste processing, overseeing solid waste programs and four full-service recycling centers, capital project planning, and conducting residential and business community outreach efforts focusing on sustainability and waste reduction. Jeff joined the County in 2014 as director. Previously, he served as director of Solid Waste for Fairfax County, VA. He holds a Bachelor of Science in engineering and has completed coursework toward a Master of Business Administration at Virginia Tech University. He is a member of the Solid Waste Association of North America and was formerly an International Board Member.

Jeff jumped right into his presentation, which involved a large number of slides and a tremendous number of facts and figures about Mecklenburg's Solid Waste Disposal Programs. The presentation, including Jeff's commentary, is available on the Club's website, which can be accessed through the link in this week's Reporter. It was entertaining as well as

informative, and I recommend it to everyone. He is clearly a huge asset to the County and a leader in his field, not to mention being a very good presenter with an excellent sense of humor. The answer to the title question above is “Away”. That is where solid waste goes, and that is all that many people care to know about it. The details are much more involved and interesting, and include the fact that most of the solid waste that is not recycled goes into the Speedway Landfill in Cabarrus County. That site will likely be completely filled within six years, and Jeff and his people are actively seeking other sites to handle the waste after the Cabarrus site is exhausted. They have a capital plan for making the needed investments that goes out fifteen years into the future. One thing is sure, and that is that property values and population density make it impossible to locate another landfill in Mecklenburg County.

There are currently four Full-Service Collection Centers in the County, with two more under construction. A smaller center is on Monroe Road and a large center is in Steele Creek. Items that cannot be easily handled through curbside pickup can be dropped off at the collection centers. These items include Expanded Polystyrene Foam, shredded paper, and textiles (not much weight but huge volume, saving lots of landfill space). Books, paint and solvents, used oils of both the cooking and petroleum varieties, small, motorized equipment, household appliances and more can be safely disposed of, and recycled to the greatest degree economically feasible.

Jeff noted that it is not enough to recycle. You must recycle properly to be effective. A market willing to purchase or at least accept the items must exist for recycling to work, and the entities that take these items require that what they buy be mostly or totally ‘clean’, which is to say not mixed with other things, notably plastic bags or food waste. There are working markets for only six items collected from your curb—plastic bottles and jugs with necks; cardboard and small cardboard boxes; milk and juice cartons; paper and magazines; glass bottles and jars, including with lids on; and empty metal cans, both steel and aluminum. Plastic bags, including bubble wrap and similar items do not have such markets and simply increase recycling costs when mixed with the marketable items. These items, and others not included in the list of six, can be dropped off at the Collection Centers.

Educating the public about the benefits of recycling and how to do it properly is a major focus of his organization, and they work continuously on doing that. All varieties of social media, advertisements in periodicals and over the airways, billboards, direct mail, and presentations in schools and to groups such as Rotary are all employed in the education effort. Huge progress has been made, but there is still some 10 to 12 percent of recyclable items go directly into the landfill; and some 20 percent of the items that are picked up at curbside and delivered to the sorting center cannot be recycled and end up in the landfill.

It is obvious that Mecklenburg County has a huge asset in the person of Jeff Smithberger. He is a leader in his field when it comes to innovation and optimizing the use of resources, and has

won multiple awards for himself and the County for his efforts. I urge you again to watch the full presentation on this important topic in the Rotary Reporter. What you will learn about the Foamasaurus Rex, the Center for Employment Opportunity and the “Recycle the Runway” program will make it worth the 30 minutes you will spend.

A recording of the meeting can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/990758504>
The program introduction begins at approximately 23 minutes and 50 seconds.