Ch. Hill News

Future of our trash is now

Commentary
Bonnie Hauser

With the landfill finally closing, Orange County is taking a needed look at its entire solid waste and recycling operation. It starts by thanking the commissioners for bravely deciding to close the landfill. It's the right thing to do – even though all the implications are not fully imagined. Our trash and recycling systems will change – and it's time to plan new systems that build on successes from the past.

With a nearby landfill, the county could afford an elaborate process of materials separation and disposal. For decades, county landfill workers sifted through the trash to pull out recyclables and move the county toward its impressive 59 percent waste-reduction rate. Landfill fees subsidized recycling, recycling extended the landfill capacity, and everyone was happy (except the Rogers Road community which was forced to endure the stench, traffic and other offenses).

Citizens did their part – separating green, brown and clear bottles, and keeping magazines separate from newspapers. In this way, we helped the county garner premium prices from the sale of recyclables. Over the years, we developed good recycling habits, and today, residential waste streams are generally free of recyclables. The county has turned its attention to schools, churches and multi-family properties to further improve waste-reduction rates.

A few years ago, things started to change.

With the prospect of closing the landfill, staff reallocated monies to eliminate the cross subsidies. The economics revealed that the county was spending $3.7 million on recycling. Much of these costs were recovered from the sale of materials.

When the economy tanked, the prices for recyclable materials dropped, and the county's recycling costs were barely offset at all. At the same time, hauling costs were increasing, so the county started to combine materials – ultimately ending up in today's single-stream process where all the recyclables go on one truck and are separated at the destination. Residents continued to separate out recyclables, and many have added composting to our daily routine.

Orange County families pay two recycling fees, a base fee and a curbside collection fee. These fees are in addition to fees and taxes for convenience centers. Costs for trash collection are additional. It's expensive and confusing, and few people understand it.

Things got more complicated when the county learned that its curbside recycling collection program doesn't comply with state statute. Now they want to end it. This decision has no impact on the base recycling program which funds recycling planning, education, services to schools and other services. Curbside recycling collection may change – possibly for the better.

Chapel Hill is looking into taking over the urban curbside recycling program, to save money and improve service. Plus they plan to build a small transfer station which may also serve Carrboro and UNC. Added to the landfill closing, this leaves little for the county's $12 million solid waste system.

The rural community relies primarily on the county's five convenience centers for trash and recycling (44 percent of the county's recyclables are collected at drop sites). Households near town hire private haulers – such as Waste Industries or Efland Trash Service. For these families, the county is exploring options including voluntary franchises, where residents would use haulers selected by the county for trash and/or recycling.

There are other changes. The county has begun to upgrade its convenience centers. Paving the centers and adding compactors will improve hauling efficiencies for trash and recyclables. It's the right idea – but the $4 million to $5 million price tag seems high.

These changes require new skills and equipment, and most of the county's infrastructure will no longer be needed – especially if over half of the revenues go away. If the towns and county ever come back together, the system will look nothing like it does today.

This is the perfect time for the county to examine its entire service and fee structure, and explore options to move forward. Privatizing all of it may be an option, and offers the potential to provide flexible, cost-effective service, and accelerate the transition to compaction and out-of-county hauling. Of course, questions need to be answered about services and costs, and how to ensure employment, living wages and benefits for county employees. No matter what, fees need to be simpler and, it might help to benchmark services vs other counties (that's in addition to waste-reduction rates).

This is the time for the public to engage and express their needs and priorities for service. At the same time, we need the county to be fully transparent about services, fees and alternatives. The commissioners have opened a platform for discussion with an information session on April 9 followed by a public hearing on April 23. For meeting information, go to orangecountync.gov/OCCLERKS/agenmenu.asp

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