

# The Chapel Hill News

Commentary:

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## Rescinding the 3 R's

BY TERRI BUCKNER

Orange County takes great pride in our recycling program. Annually, due to the dedication of our knowledgeable staff and dedicated populace, we deflect about 16,000 tons from the landfill into productive uses through recycling and composting.

When the program started in Chapel Hill in 1987, residents had to separate glass, cans, and newspaper and take them to drop-off centers. Within two years, citizen participation had become entrenched and curbside pick up began. Over the years, the program has expanded to include Carrboro and all of Orange County.

Recycling isn't unique to Orange County. North Carolina imposes disposal bans on electronics, plastic bottles, aluminum cans, batteries, white goods, yard waste, and oyster shells, in every county. But Orange County has led the state, not just in the amount we recycle, but in our policies and the variety of materials staff has found useful markets for.

So why are we changing a successful system?

In August 2012, a court case in Cabarrus County challenged their adequate public facilities ordinance. The court ruled that the county was not authorized by the state to apply that zoning restriction. Since then, other aspects of local control have been threatened, including how local services are being paid for.

In Orange County, we pay for recycling with the 3R fee. That fee has two components. The 3R Basic is a \$37 fee charged to every residence (single family and multifamily, urban and rural) in the county. The second half of the assessment covers collections and is charged depending on location (rural, urban or multifamily). Since counties can't assign a collection fee to anyone who doesn't use the service, this portion of the 3R assessment leaves the county vulnerable to a legal challenge. So the county attorney has recommended that it be discontinued. That portion of the 3R assessment currently generates about \$1.7M/year for operations of the recycling program.

Some will say that since the county has already privatized recycling in the urban areas, this proposed expansion to county residents should not create any concerns. But if all recycling in Orange County is privatized, the current system is effectually dead, including all the outreach and education, the goodwill recycling and composting at public events like Hog Day, the dedicated staff constantly seeking new markets, and the service to both school systems that has always been handled

by the county. In other words, we'll be left with the same kind of recycling program that everyone else in the state has.

In 1997 as part of the state's required plan, we adopted a goal of 61 percent waste reduction. We're just a smidgeon away from achieving that goal (59 percent). We've accomplished something amazing, something worth fighting to protect.

For those of you who have been following county politics, our own schools for public facilities ordinance (SAPFO) is also being reviewed in response to the same court case. But that's a different (but related) column.

The county staff will be presenting a menu of options for the 3R assessment, including privatization, to the county commissioners of April 9. Citizen input will be taken at that meeting. I know I am not the only person who feels passionately about this program. If you value it as I do, please show up and speak out against dismantling a program that serves as a model across North Carolina and beyond.