

Macon in Top 10 for recycling

By Colin McCandless

Macon County is ranked seventh out of the state's 100 counties in per capita recycling rate, according to a report from the North Carolina Department of the Environment and Natural Resources.

Despite the absence of mandatory programs or curbside recycling, Macon County has been ranked in the top 10 in per capita recycling rate for seven straight years, ranking as high as fourth.

While there are recycling centers throughout the county, there is no scheduled recycling pick up.

The report from DENR comes on the heels of their challenge to local governments in North Carolina to dramatically improve the performance of their recycling programs, to "2 Million Tons by 2012."

This term refers to achieving an annual rate of two million tons of recycling through municipal and county recycling programs.

The annual rate of recycling reported for Fiscal Year 2006-07 rose to a new record of 1.35 million tons.

To reach two million tons of annual recovery by 2012, local government recycling programs would need to increase their performance by 48 percent from the July 1, 2007 baseline, which represents about a 10 percent improvement per year.

The North Carolina Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance has calculated that reaching the goal will require as many communities as possible to reach a per capita recycling rate of 451 pounds per person.

Though it has an all voluntary recycling program, Macon's current per capita recycling rate is 487.44 pounds per person, placing the county ahead of the per capita target each county would need to achieve to contribute their share of the state goal.

Part of the reason for this impressive showing is due to outreach efforts from solid waste management.

Chris Stahl, solid waste management director said that he and recycling coordinator Joel Ostroff try to focus on educating the community, through speaking engagements to civic organizations, schools and businesses.

"We try to get as many people involved in recycling as possible," Stahl said.

Stahl said the county's strong recycling program is largely due to the voluntary efforts of citizens.

"Without the public we would not be as successful," Stahl said.

He credited Ostroff not only for his talks with the schools and other groups, but his work with local businesses and industries. Stahl said when Ostroff meets with businesses he examines their operation for materials that can be recycled and helps companies reduce their waste.

"We've gotten a lot of good response from the businesses and industries," Stahl said.

He highlighted some new recycling developments within solid waste management that should help maintain the county's success. They include the addition of an events recycling trailer and bins for county and town-sponsored events, made possible by a grant from DENR. The trailer was unveiled at the Macon County Fair this year.

Stahl said they will try to use the trailer even at small events within the county to create more public awareness of recycling.

Another new program they are doing in conjunction with nonprofit organizations such as R.E.A.C.H. and Habitat is accepting the used clothes these groups don't sell and recycling them back out, allowing the clothing to be taken to Third World countries.

Currently they are just collecting clothes from nonprofits, as they have only one trailer for clothes and can't yet handle the volume that would result from citizens bringing in their clothes as well.

They are also working on a pilot program to recycle rigid plastics, (i.e. 5-gallon buckets, Little Tikes toy sets). They have a buyer in New York and are collaborating with another county to bale the rigid plastics.

Presently, they are separating rigid plastics when someone drops them off, but Stahl says the biggest challenge they face is figuring out where to store them since space is at a premium and a lot of these items are bulky.

"We are trying to make some changes down at recycling to generate some more room through clever stacking, but we're still in the process of that," Stahl said.

A future goal is to do electronic recycling, although Stahl says they are waiting on the state to see what they do before moving forward. He has been talking to companies about electronic recycling and they hope to be recycling electronic waste such as computer and TV parts by Jan. 1.

Once they can start recycling e-waste, Stahl said solid waste would be taking basically every commodity on the state's recycling list except textiles, and they don't do raw

textiles because Macon doesn't have a textile mill here.

"We are trying to hit it from every angle we can," Stahl said.

Another bonus has been the addition of the new recycling baler that solid waste management put in last year, which has meant they can bale faster. It allows them to seek more items and increase recycling rates on items they've already been taking.

Perhaps in a nod to places like Macon, Scott Mouw, state recycling program director with the NC DPPEA, said "We've already seen that even small communities in the most rural areas of the state can run high-performance recycling programs," and that if other municipalities and counties follow the "excellent examples of many of their own peers in improving recycling services" the 2 million ton goal could be reached.

Stahl said he would put our all-voluntary program against anybody else's and we would stack up well.

"I'm proud of our recycling program," Stahl said. "I'm glad people have taken ownership of the program. And I hope we continue to grow."

Top ten counties in per capita recycling rate

County	Per capita recovery
Dare	1,213.09
Catawba	956.25
Scotland	577.60
Forsyth	574.68
Buncombe	562.94
Moore	555.01
Macon	487.44
Pitt	453.53
Camden	426.73
Orange	422.83