

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Montgomery Advertiser**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[◀ Back](#)

ALABAMA VOICES: Demand recycling

December 17, 2007

By Pat Byington

The question came from out of the blue: "Do people recycle in Alabama?" asked the young bakery shop clerk in Cannon Beach, Ore., where I was vacationing with my family this past summer. I've worn my University of Alabama T-shirt many a time, but it has never elicited that question before.

Curious, and caught just a bit off guard, I answered with my own question: "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, I visited Alabama for a few weeks earlier in the year," she began, haltingly, "and there were no recycling centers. There was nothing. Just a lot of trashy roadsides. It was kinda ugly."

"Yeah, I know," I replied through a grimace. I also knew why it was that way.

If you ever wanted to identify the longest list of abandoned policy recommendations in the history of state government, you would have to look no further than Alabama's 1991 Solid Waste Management plan concerning recycling and waste reduction.

Following a legislative mandate, the 1991 plan recommended various initiatives designed to fulfill a 25 percent recycling/waste reduction goal in our state's solid waste stream by 1997. Nearly a generation later, Alabama is nowhere close to achieving that goal.

So why can't we recycle and reduce our garbage in Alabama like so many other communities around the country? We can, except for the lack of political will.

A case in point: I have relatives in Shelby County's Brook Highland neighborhood who recently told me about an exciting new recycling program in their community initiated by a high school senior as a class project. The ambitious student is picking up people's recyclables, door to door, and charging residents a monthly fee.

After living in Alabama for more than 15 years, my relatives are thrilled to finally have a curbside recycling program. All this from a high school class project that will most likely end when the student graduates in May.

Now, I don't have a problem with the student's ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit, but shouldn't my relatives be able to expect the same service from Waste Management, the neighborhood's waste collector and one of the largest companies of its kind in North America?

Well, they should expect that service, and they would get it if they lived somewhere else. If they happened to live in a suburban Seattle neighborhood, where my wife's parents live, Waste Management would go to great lengths to help them recycle.

As my father-in-law boasts, his local government is so serious about recycling and waste reduction, it demands compliance from its waste collectors.

It requires companies such as Waste Management to provide two large recycling containers to each household -- one for recyclables and the other for yard waste -- and a small garbage bin. The tiny bin is an inducement to recycle, plain and simple.

Depending on where you live in Alabama, it costs \$20 to \$30 to landfill a ton of garbage. If we did achieve the 25 percent goal, Alabama would save \$20 million to \$30 million in landfill costs, lengthen landfill life, save energy, bolster the recycled-materials industry, develop new markets and create far more jobs than by simply burying all of our recyclables.

But it has to start with political will and leadership from the local government. Without policies that require waste collectors to create recycling incentives, none of this would happen.

Recent statistics on solid waste from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management give a compelling reason why we should recycle more in this state. Alabamians throw away approximately seven pounds of garbage per person per day, or more than a ton and a half a year. With about 4.6 million state residents, that means we toss out more than 11.5 billion

pounds of garbage every year.

In contrast, Alabama's recycling rate is a meager 8.3 percent, which is far below the 25 percent goal set nearly two decades ago, according to ADEM. For comparison, the national recycling rate, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, is 32 percent, four times the current rate in Alabama. We are getting trounced by the rest of the nation when it comes to recycling.

Genuine efforts to recycle and reduce our wastes statewide will also create a new culture of environmental stewardship in Alabama, one that will find unacceptable the littered roadsides and streambanks, and the illegal dumps in our forests we currently tolerate.

All it takes to spark the change is political will, and a bit of prodding from the citizenry. Maybe it is time we dust off that 1991 Solid Waste Plan and start implementing it. But before we do that, perhaps it is time we all start demanding recycling in our own neighborhood, and not wait for a high school class project to tackle this urgent problem.

Pat Byington is a senior associate with the Wilderness Society and a former member of the Alabama Environmental Management Commission.
