



NORTH CAROLINA CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH INC.

NEWS RELEASE

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N.C. CENTER SAYS STATE MUST DEAL WITH CRITICAL LANDFILL PROBLEMS

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research says the N.C. General Assembly should create a statewide revolving fund to help cities and counties pay for new solid waste landfills to replace those that will soon be filled beyond capacity. Nearly one-third of the state's 119 municipal and county landfills will run out of space within five years, the Center has found, and without help, cities and counties will be hard-pressed to replace them.

The Center, in the latest issue of its quarterly magazine, North Carolina Insight, notes that 12 county landfills have less than two years of life remaining and at least 35 of the state's 119 landfills have less than five years to go. After that, counties and cities that want to open new landfills face difficulty in finding the money to purchase land for landfills and operating them under new standards that require expensive clay or plastic liners and leachate collection systems for the landfills. (Leachates are fluids that drain through soil into the water table. Solid waste leachates often contain pollutants, some of them toxic.)

"Relatively few people realize that one of North Carolina's toughest environmental problems is the disposal of ordinary trash that comes from households, businesses, and the corner grocery store," says Insight Editor Jack Betts. "But the fact is that one of our most pressing problems is what to do with the mountains of trash -- paper, cardboard, drink containers, leftover tuna casserole, old newspapers, and an incredible array of junk -- that we toss out each day. Landfills are rapidly filling up, and many landfills just don't have much room anymore."

The Center's recommendations are based on an article written for Insight by Tom Mather, environmental reporter for The News and Observer of Raleigh. The article examines North Carolina's growing municipal solid waste disposal problems and highlights potential solutions to landfilling. These alternatives are needed because of the dual landfill problem of finding available space and new state requirements for plastic liners that drive up the cost of landfills.

Barely a generation ago, garbage disposal in North Carolina was rarely a front-page news story. City governments were still handling trash as they always had; they dumped it in open, rat-infested mounds and burned what they could outdoors. The smoke and the stench could be detected miles away. Then came a revolution in technology -- the sanitary landfill, in which governments could dump trash and garbage, compact it with enormous machines, and cover it all with a thick layer of dirt. That was considered an environmentally sound way to handle our refuse -- until cities began running out of land, groundwater started becoming polluted from leakage out of landfills, and environmental agencies began applying stricter landfill controls that are driving up the cost of this once-standard method of solid waste disposal.

Typically, landfills in North Carolina used to cost \$5,000 to \$10,000 per acre to develop. But with higher land costs and the liner requirement, the cost now can be 20 times that -- \$100,000 to \$125,000 per acre, according to the N.C. Association of County Commissioners.

Those liners are needed because landfills contain a potentially toxic soup of materials -- ranging from discarded oil to bacteria-infested food scraps -- that can leach, or leak, into nearby groundwater and streams. Liners are being required because more than half of the state's homes and industries depend on groundwater through wells. State investigators have found "acutely toxic" levels of pollutants in the water at half the landfill sites they've sampled.

In June 1987, the N.C. Department of Human Resources and the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development agreed to seek a 90 percent reduction in the volume and toxicity of landfill waste over the next 20 years. That's no small order. North Carolina now generates about 25 million pounds of solid waste daily -- or about four pounds per person each day. Most of that garbage ends up in the state's 150 industrial and public landfills, 119 of which are operated by local governments.

Waste disposal "is on the verge of becoming a statewide issue of utmost importance to the counties," says Ed Regan, assistant executive director for the N.C. Association of County Commissioners. "The issue is double-edged for counties. On one hand, the state's efforts in protecting groundwater are going to make traditional ways of solid waste disposal much more expensive. Although we realize the short-term conversion away from the conventional landfill is going to be expensive, we realize it's necessary. We now know that [landfills] pose a serious threat in many cases to groundwater."

The Center identifies two model approaches that reduce the amount of municipal waste -- incineration of waste in New Hanover County and recycling in Mecklenburg County. Solid waste incinerators -- like the ones operating in New Hanover County and Wrightsville Beach, and another under construction in Mecklenburg County -- may be part of the solution, though they cannot solve the problem entirely. In New Hanover County, the incinerator reduces the volume of burned trash by 85 percent but can't handle it all. So the county still operates a landfill for disposal of about 30 percent of its trash and for burial of the incinerator ashes and certain non-burnable materials. "Roughly, for every 10 trucks of garbage that come in, only one to one-and-a-half truckloads come out," New Hanover County Engineer C. Ed Hilton says. "Without this reduction of waste, that landfill would last only about 10 years. With this incinerator, it will probably last about four times that."

But there are potential environmental problems even with incinerators, including air emissions that the EPA will soon begin regulating to prevent toxic air pollution. These questions about incinerators creating new environmental problems have caused some counties to look at another alternative for reducing the amount of waste -- recycling.

The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County began a household recycling program in February and hope to be serving 100,000 households in the city of Charlotte by the fall of 1988. Participants in the program are asked to place newspapers, aluminum, glass, and plastic bottles in a single trash can for sorting at curbside. The county now recycles about 10 percent of its waste, and officials hope to increase that to 30 percent by 1994, which would alleviate the burden on the county landfill.

Regardless of what type of alternative local governments choose to reduce the volume of solid waste, however, the Center notes that landfills will be needed. To help counties and cities deal with their solid waste problems, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research makes five recommendations, including the following:

1. The state of North Carolina should establish a revolving loan fund for local landfill construction. North Carolina's county and municipal landfills are rapidly running out of room, with 12 of those landfills having less than two years before they will be full. Because local governments may have difficulty securing financing to open new landfills, the 1988 General Assembly should establish a revolving loan fund to enable county and city governments to open new landfills. Under such a program, the state would offer low interest loans to local governments for landfill projects; repaid loans then could be used by the state to finance other projects. In 1987, the state established such a fund for water and sewer projects, with an initial appropriation of \$21.5 million. While such a loan fund would not relieve counties and cities of the cost for disposal projects, it would allow them to begin operating quicker and at a potentially lower cost, because the loan funds would be available at less-than-bond market rates. The fund might also be used by counties which decide to band together to open regional waste disposal centers, including regional waste incinerators to reduce waste volume before landfilling the remains. Alamance County and the City of Greensboro are currently considering plans for a jointly operated regional incinerator.

2. The state should expand funding of the model "Pollution Prevention Pays" program. Case studies of 55 N.C. industries have shown they are saving more than \$12 million a year in operating and disposal costs by reducing, recycling, or preventing wastes before they become pollutants. The Pollution Prevention Pays program has become popular with industry not only because it helps solve industrial waste problems, but also because savings show up on corporate income statements. Thus, expansion of this program -- which has helped the state substantially reduce its production of solid and hazardous wastes -- would likely lead to increased savings in terms of waste reduction. Yet the 1987 General Assembly cut its research budget in half and declined to increase its staff. The 1988 legislature should not only restore its research budget to \$300,000, says the Center, but also increase its operating budget in order to expand its staff and provide more technical services to local governments wishing to reduce the amount of solid waste.

3. The General Assembly should examine whether a beverage container deposit law would (a) significantly reduce solid waste and thereby address local problems, and (b) harm the growing container recycling industry in North Carolina. Ten states have a beverage container recycling bill. They are California, Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Oregon, and Vermont. A legislative study commission may be the best way to determine the answers to these questions, says the Center.

The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization created to examine state government policies and practices. The Center is supported in part by grants from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations, both in Winston-Salem. Other funding comes from 105 corporate contributors and 670 individual and organizational members. In addition to its quarterly magazine, the Center also publishes book-length research reports. Past studies have been issued on all the boards and commissions in state government, for-profit hospitals, and state prison policy.

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Copies of the issue of North Carolina Insight magazine containing the research on the landfills and municipal waste are available for \$6.30 plus \$1.00 postage from the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, P.O. Box 430, Raleigh, NC 27602, or call (919) 832-2839.

For more information, call Jack Betts or Ran Coble at the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research at (919) 832-2839.

Projected Life for Municipal/County Landfills

Name of Landfill	Year Opened	Total Acres	Acres Used	Acres Remain	Ave. Depth	Remaining Life (Years)*
Alamance County	1979	20	16	4	50	-1
Alexander County	1979	25	10	15	30	+5
Alleghany County	1982	14	5	9	33	+10
Anson County	1979	13	13	3	30	+2
Ashe County	1971	100	25	75	50	+10
Avery County	1972	14	8	6	45	+2
Beaufort County	1978	60	41	19	12	+5
Bertie County	1973	101	88	13	13	+2
Bladen County	1972	57	25	20	16	+2
Brunswick County	1984	54	12	42	8	+5
Buncombe County	1973	90	60	30	60	+2
Burke County	1988	318	0	318	35	+30
Cabarrus County:						
Charlotte Motor Speedway	1973	110	0	110	35	+5
Cabarrus County	1974	242	62	180	40	+2
Caldwell County	1975	60	45	15	125	+2
Carteret County	1984	30	10	20	20	+5
Caswell County	1975	10	5	5	18	+5
Catawba County	1973	90	75	15	30	+2
Catawba County	1981	170	30	140	25	+5
Chatham County	1973	79	40	39	25	+10
Cherokee County	1972	16	12	4	20	-2
Clay County	1976	87	75	100	27	+10
Cleveland County:						
Cleveland Container Service	1975	116	10	106	40	+10
Columbus County	1973	50	50	4	10	+10
Craven County	1983	120	40	80	16	+10
Cumberland County	1980	200	90	110	38	+5
Currituck County	1974	0	0	0	15	+2
Dare County	1982	30	5	25	20	+5
Davidson County:						
Davidson County	1984	60	10	50	15	+2
Lexington, City of	1972	33	28	5	18	+2
Thomasville, City of	1961	105	80	25	40	+5
Davie County	1981	60	52	8	35	+5
Duplin County	1973	100	80	20	13	+2
Durham County:						
Durham, City of	1974	130	95	25	45	+2
Edgecombe County	1974	271	35	60	35	+10
Forsyth County:						
Winston-Salem, City of	1975	176	43	123	85	+10
Winston-Salem, City of	1969	50	18	32	45	+2

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*** Key:**

Bold type indicates fewer than 5 years remaining.

"+" in front of a number indicates more than; "-" indicates less than.