On the Ground in Gwinnett:

PLASTIC LITTER REPORT

Gwinnett RECYCLES

Earth Day | April 22, 2021

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Letter from the Founder of Gwinnett Recycles

In 2020, Gwinnett Recycles set forth on a citizen science project to collect and analyze the trash found in the environment in our community. Over nine months, we brought citizens together for litter cleanups in each of Gwinnett County, Georgia's 16 cities and logged details about the plastic waste we collected. Inspired by the litter audits conducted globally by Break Free From Plastic, we focused on plastic because of its ubiquity, the harm it causes people and the planet as it is produced and as it degrades in nature, and the unique challenges it poses for recycling. Our in-depth research and analysis of 10,042 littered items produced the findings shared in this report.

Plastic is a recent invention, and plastic waste is a new problem that has already reached crisis levels. The amount of plastic the world makes annually has exploded in the span of a single generation, from almost zero in 1940 to 400 million tons today. Every American is now using more than 300 pounds of plastic per year,[1] and the United States is the number-one generator of plastic waste in the world.

Plastic is problematic throughout its lifecycle, from extraction to disposal. While we witness its side effects most commonly in the form of unsightly litter, plastic is also sickening the residents of the communities in which it is manufactured and worsening the climate crisis.[2] Plastic is a manmade, foreign "forever material" that isn't able to be decomposed by nature or ever truly go away, but it is often utilized in the manufacture of packaging and goods designed for temporary—usually ridiculously fleeting—applications. All of the 8.3 billion tons of plastic that has ever been produced (every piece of plastic that you or I have ever used or touched) still exists, and nearly 80 percent of it now sits in landfills or in the natural environment. For approximately every four plastic items collected for recycling, one ends up littered or illegally dumped—a significant number with meaningful consequences that are seen and felt daily in our own community.

Having picked up lots of plastic trash—as well as, in lower quantity, litter made of paper, cardboard, metal, and glass—all over Gwinnett County, we are frustrated that people litter.

[1] From *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* by Susan Freinkel

[2] Plastic is a key element of the climate crisis, with plastic production closely linked to the availability of cheap and abundant fossil fuels. In 2019, the lifecycle of global plastic production had a climate impact equivalent to 189 coal-fired power plants. According to the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL), emissions related to plastic could amount to 56 billion tons of carbon between now and 2050. That's almost 50 times the annual emissions of all the coal power plants in the U.S. As the world begins to shift away from fossil fuel for transportation, Big Oil is turning to plastic to support future growth.

But for too long, the conversation around litter and plastic waste has started and ended with the individual—the "litterbug" or the person living a "wasteful" lifestyle. It's no accident that the discourse runs along these tracks. Instead of taking responsibility for their enormous contribution to litter in our community and worldwide, the corporations driving and profiting from the problem have designed highly influential blame-shifting campaigns (such as the "Crying Indian" ad in 1971, funded by leading beverage and packaging companies) that serve their intended purpose to divide, distract, and mislead the public. After decades of public service announcements, education campaigns, and anti-littering enforcement, litter still plagues most communities and seems to be worse than ever. Perhaps it's because we've been treating the symptom instead of the cause.

So let's continue working to prevent littering, reduce our own waste, and consider what we can do to change individuals' behavior for the better. But let us also ask other important questions. Why are billion-dollar brands permitted to make our planet's limited resources, and even our own bodies and health, increasingly disposable? Why do they manufacture one-time-use products out of a harmful forever material? Why do companies like Coca-Cola block sensible recycling solutions such as container deposit programs? Why are corporations allowed to dump plastic pellets into waterways? Why is the cost to produce new plastic kept artificially low with scaled-back regulations and fossil fuel subsidies to the tune of $5.2 trillion annually?

Let's also be sure to ask ourselves a question—the most important question of all: **Will we continue to allow this?** Or will we demand a better world?

I think you know how I'll be answering that one.

Laura

Laura A. Hernandez

Founder, Gwinnett Recycles

Introduction

Gwinnett Recycles teaches citizens to reduce their consumption, repair and reuse, nourish soils with compost, and recycle as much as possible. These are important things for us each to do to live in accordance with our values. But even if every person in Gwinnett County and around the world adopted those behaviors overnight, we would still struggle with excess litter and unwanted plastic waste. The biggest changes have to happen at the very starting point of the problem.

Contrary to the current playbook, the problem doesn't start the moment when someone litters. That moment, while unfortunate, is only the final punctuation mark on a long sequence of mistakes.

The problem starts at the greed of the crude oil well and the recklessness of the natural gas fracking site. It starts at the callous act of treating human lives as expendable. It starts with the short-sightedness of designing single-use products out of a toxic "forever" material. It starts at the delusion that the environment is a wholly-owned subsidiary of the economy, rather than the other way around. It starts with the arrogance of treating the Earth less like the treasure that it is and more like a business in liquidation.

We depend on Earth to eat, drink, breathe, and live. Figuring out how to keep our life support system running needs to be our number-one priority. Nothing is more important than finding a way to live responsibly, justly, respectfully, sustainably, and joyously on the only planet we can call home.

In the words of Senator Gaylord Nelson, the founder of Earth Day: "The ultimate test of man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard."

Our task today is to make the hard choices and necessary sacrifices, as companies, as government leaders, and as individuals, to ensure that all people today can thrive and that future generations will live in a world worthy of thanks.

On the Ground in Gwinnett

Litter Audit at a Glance

1	COMMITTED GOAL
5	TONS OF LITTER
9	MONTHS OF EVENTS
16	CLEANER CITIES
125	COMMUNITY VOLUNTEERS
267	BAGS OF LITTER
704	VOLUNTEER HOURS
10,042	LITTERED ITEMS LOGGED

Litter Audit Methodology

Site Selection

Gwinnett County is large—both in land area (437 square miles) and population size (nearly one million people)—and diverse in demographics and physical topography. To obtain a representative sampling of the litter in our community for this report, in August 2020 Gwinnett Recycles set the goal of hosting a litter cleanup and plastic litter audit in each of the county's 16 cities and logging at least 5,000 pieces of plastic litter. We established a deadline of Earth Day, April 22, 2021.

With the help of 125 community volunteers turned citizen scientists, we not only achieved this mission but surpassed it, organizing a total of 17 litter cleanups and audits—at least one in each city—and logging 10,042 pieces of litter during our nine-month project.

Some of the cleanups were held within city limits, and others in the unincorporated addresses just outside of city limits. Cleanups were hosted in a wide variety of settings. Several took place on major thoroughfares, others on roads behind shopping centers, still others on streets in quiet residential areas, and a handful in what should be unspoiled natural spaces—woods, wetlands, and waterways, including the Chattahoochee River, Apalachee River, Yellow River, and Crooked Creek—which were sadly very littered.

Data Collection and Analysis

In total, volunteers audited the plastic items from 267 bags of litter, or approximately 10,680 pounds (5.34 tons) of trash, that were collected in these 17 cleanups. After picking up litter for the first one and a half hours of each event, volunteers spent another hour sorting the plastic contents of the bagged litter into six piles: Plastic Bottles, All Cups, Food Wrappers, Plastic Bags and Film, Smoking Materials, and Miscellaneous.

Once the plastic contents of the bags were sorted, volunteers split into teams to log the items in each pile, filling out printed data cards developed by the global nonprofit Break

Free From Plastic. For every plastic item sorted, volunteers noted details such as brand name, item description, category, type of plastic, single-use or multi-use, and quantity.

After each audit, Gwinnett Recycles founder Laura Hernandez inputted the handwritten data from these sheets into an Excel spreadsheet categorized by city, reviewed and cleaned the data, and wherever applicable, matched brand names to their parent companies. A data scientist, Vince Vertulfo, performed the analyses.

Limitations

Our broad and diverse sample set provides a meaningful snapshot of the most prevalent plastic litter in Gwinnett County. However, any study faces limitations. Types of plastic litter that may be unintentionally underrepresented in our reporting include small items (such as cigarette butts, straws, and scraps of foam or film), paper that is imperceptibly coated with plastic (such as certain fast-food packaging), and multi-use items (such as housewares and construction materials) that are designed with plastic as well as natural materials in a way that is difficult to visually discern.

In addition, the full extent to which particular brands contribute to plastic pollution may be underrepresented because their packaging, when exposed to the elements, loses its brand identity markers more quickly or easily than others. Forty-nine percent of the plastic items logged in this project no longer displayed a visible brand.

Nevertheless, with 10,042 items collected over a nine-month period, the data provides a strong indication of the companies and plastics that habitually pollute our community.

On the Ground in Gwinnett

Key Audit Findings

Finding: Our community is facing a plastic pollution crisis.

Most of us have seen pictures of trash in the sea, heard about the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, and maybe even read the alarming scientific projection that by 2050, the world's oceans will contain more plastic than fish. Fewer people are aware that plastic waste isn't just taking over our oceans—it's invading natural ecosystems far inland. The plastic pollution crisis that we know is happening at sea is simultaneously playing out in our own communities—in our own neighborhoods.

At every litter cleanup during this project, volunteers found plastic items flaking into the surrounding soil or water as tiny bits that become virtually impossible to completely collect and remove. Unlike natural, non-synthetic materials, plastic never actually biodegrades. A plastic bag does not return to nature like a banana peel, which is digested by hungry microorganisms. All plastics are polymers, which is Greek for "many parts." Those long repeating chains of hydrocarbons and other molecules—materials that humans created—have never before existed in nature, and therefore cannot be broken down by any known microorganism back into elements found in nature. Instead of breaking down, that littered plastic bag breaks *apart*. Weathered by sun, wind, and water, plastic disintegrates into the environment as smaller and smaller pieces called "microplastic." While microplastic is a plague in oceans, where fish, seabirds, and other animals regularly mistake it for food, it's even more ubiquitous on land. Experts estimate that microplastic pollution is somewhere between four and 23 times higher in the soil than in the sea. Plastic is in wind, it's in rain, it's in snow. Scientists have found plastic everywhere they've ever looked, including in the most isolated and untouched places on the planet.

Microplastic doesn't just remain in the environment—it enters our water supply and food chain. A recent study estimates that the average human is now ingesting 2,000 tiny pieces of plastic—equivalent to the weight of a credit card—each week. We're drinking and eating plastic and, inevitably, all of the chemicals and additives that plastic products are made with, including fillers, pigments, stabilizers, flame retardants, antistatic additives, plasticizers, blowing agents, lubricants, antibacterials, fungicides, and fragrances[3]—not all of which are vetted for environmental and human safety. In one ten-pound batch of household plastics, tests have revealed a thousand different chemicals. Unfortunately, there is no way for us as consumers to find out all of the different chemicals that are in the plastic things we buy. Even manufacturers might not know!

Plastic pollution isn't just a crisis in the ocean's gyres. It's a crisis here, and everywhere.

Finding: The vast majority of litter is single-use plastic.

Plastic was introduced in the 1950s as a miracle material that was cheap, able to be molded into anything, and could just be thrown in the trash when you were done using it. When plastic entered the mainstream, its disposability was a novel and attractive feature.

Plastic production has continued to grow ever since, increasing steeply just in the 21st century. Half of all plastics ever made have been produced since 2005. Production isn't showing any signs of slowing—in fact, it's expected to almost quadruple by 2050, according to the World Economic Forum.

The problem is, much of that new plastic flooding into our world won't be for essential, durable, or technically demanding products such as lightweight automotive parts, construction products, or life-saving medical equipment. The number-one application of plastic is packaging. Most plastic packaging is single-use—another word for *disposable*. Single-use plastic is designed to be disposed of right after use.

The majority of plastic packaging is discarded into landfills or the environment within 12 months of production, which represents a shameful waste of resources. After a single use,

[3] From *Plastic Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too* by Beth Terry

95 percent of plastic packaging material value, equivalent to $80 to 120 billion, is lost to the global economy every year.

An appalling 96 percent of the plastic we found at cleanups came in the form of single-use products and packaging—9,669 items in our small study. Everything on our top ten list of commonly littered plastics—bottles, cups, bags, wrappers, straws, packing material, and butts—is single-use plastic, as well as many other items we found, like takeout boxes and utensils. Things that aren't designed to be disposable, like sporting goods and clothing, were in the four percent minority.

How can we ever enjoy a clean community when so much disposability abounds? Littering the ground is irresponsible, but is littering landfills or overwhelming recycling systems with wasteful, non-biodegradable material really much better? On the ground or in the ground, single-use plastic is still a senseless waste and a threat to clean and healthy communities.

The global zero waste advocacy organization GAIA sums it up nicely: "Single-use disposable plastic is the greatest obstacle to sound waste and resource management. Inadequate waste management systems and human negligence are often cited as the main contributors to plastic waste leakage into terrestrial and marine environments—but waste and brand audit data in many parts of the world are helping reveal that the unfettered production of disposable plastic is the actual problem. As long as the mass production of throwaway plastics continues unabated, cities and countries will find it harder and harder to cope. Put simply, disposable plastic is a pollution problem, and the only way to prevent it is to stop it at source."

96%

A full 96% of plastic litter we picked up and counted was produced to be used one time only.

There's No Excuse for Single Use

As a society in the past seven decades, we have made a habit of pumping the ground, scraping mines, and blasting mountaintops to extract finite natural substances formed over millions of years, shipping them to refineries, engineering them to never go away, pumping out emissions and pouring additional resources into fashioning them into products, trucking them to stores, buying them, bringing them home, and then just…using them for a few minutes and throwing them away. Does this make any sense to you?

Finding: Most litter is from food and drinks.

Nearly 70 percent of the plastic litter we found in this project was related to food and drinks. Roadsides, waterways, and landfills everywhere are increasingly clogged with all the accoutrements of hydrating and eating on the go, from plastic bottles (the number-one type of plastic litter we logged) to bags, wrappers, takeout containers, disposable cups, straws, and utensils. The convenience of modern food packaging is insignificant compared to the long-lasting waste and pollution footprint that this packaging leaves behind.

While it might seem impossible to imagine what daily life would be like without all this convenient packaging, until recently, much of it did not even exist. Plastic has revolutionized the way we preserve, deliver, and consume food, but the industry has evolved with little concern for the environment or for human health. Food and drink are likely our most vulnerable points of exposure to the dire effects of this disregard. The plastic used in food manufacturing, processing, and packaging today provides a direct path for chemicals and microplastic to enter our bodies. The caps of plastic bottles are found to shed microplastic. Plastics leach chemicals into the food and water they contain. Phthalates, additives used to make plastic soft and flexible, are now commonly detected in the human body, where they may act as endocrine disrupters and negatively impact fertility. With the increasing biological burden of additives like phthalates, other suspected hormone-

disrupting "everywhere chemicals," like Bisphenol A (BPA), and chemicals linked to cancer and developmental delays, some experts are making dire forecasts about human health, including our ability to reproduce without assistance in the decades to come.

The time has come to rethink food and beverage packaging, placing our priority on human health and the environment.

69%

Food or drink packaging comprised 69% of the litter we picked up and counted.

Finding: Recycling isn't the solution for plastic waste.

A common misconception is the belief that most, or even all, plastic is recyclable. This belief stands in stark contrast with the reality that only plastic bottles and jugs are commonly recycled. Most plastic is not valuable, and it never has been. What's more, the makers of plastic knew this all along, even as they told the public the opposite. "There is serious doubt that [recycling plastic] can ever be made viable on an economic basis," one plastics industry insider stated in a speech back in 1974. Yet the industry has spent millions, maybe billions, of dollars telling people to recycle, because selling recycling helps sell plastic.

One longstanding tactic is the intentionally misleading use of the chasing-arrows recycling symbol on many forms of non-recyclable packaging. In 1989, oil and plastics executives undertook a quiet campaign to lobby almost 40 states to mandate that the symbol appear on all plastic—even if there was no way to economically recycle it. To this day, the use of the symbol is not a reliable indicator of recyclability. Instead, it has often been used as another tool to "greenwash" wasteful products and promote the blame-shifting lie that the ever-growing stream of single-use packaging is manageable if only consumers would be more diligent in their recycling efforts.

Less than a tenth of plastic that is produced is recycled, with the vast majority ending up in landfills, incinerators, or the environment. Plastics recycling faces daunting hurdles. There are more than seven kinds of plastics, each with unique properties, and they cannot be processed together. Different shapes of containers have different properties, even if they are made from the same kind of plastic.[4] Plastic materials can be too small or oddly shaped to sort out, or too dirty to sell. And in most cases, making new plastic out of oil is cheaper and easier than making it out of plastic trash.

What about those recyclable plastic bottles and jugs, which made up 29 percent of the litter collected in our audits? Their useful lifespan is still limited. According to the World Economic Forum, only 2 percent of recycled plastic is turned back into the same type of thing it started out as, which is what the concept of recycling implies. Rather, 98 percent of plastic that is recycled is recycled one time—*downcycled*—into something that is a lower-value application and difficult or impossible to recycle again, such as lumber, polyester, or carpet. Downcycling a soda bottle into a carpet means that virgin plastic must be used to create the next new bottle. The process doesn't reduce production of new plastic, which should be the intent of real recycling.

While it is important to keep recycling the plastics that we can, recycling alone can't help us prevent our roads, waterways, and landfills from overfilling with plastic waste. It only keeps a certain few plastics out of landfills and the environment for a little longer.

29%

Just 29% of the plastic litter we picked up and counted could have been recycled curbside in Gwinnett, if it were both empty and clean.

[4] From *Plastic Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too* by Beth Terry

Top 10 Brands Behind Our Plastic Litter

RANK	COMPANY	BUSINESS AREA	CONTACT
1	**PepsiCo** Annual revenue: $70 billion	Beverages, Snacks	
2	**The Coca-Cola Company** Annual revenue: $33 billion	Beverages	
3	**The Kroger Co.** Annual revenue: $133 billion	Retail	
4	**Walmart** Annual revenue: $524 billion	Retail	
5	**McDonald's** Annual revenue: $19 billion	Fast Food	
6	**QuikTrip** Annual revenue: $11 billion	Convenience Retail	
7	**Nestlé** Annual revenue: $92 billion	Beverages, Food	
8	**Chick-fil-A** Annual revenue: Est. $11 billion	Fast Food	
9	**Altria** Annual revenue: $26 billion	Tobacco	
10	**Mars** Annual revenue: $37 billion	Confectionery	

Focus: The Top 10 Brands Behind Our Plastic Litter

With combined revenues approaching a trillion dollars annually ($956 billion), the top ten companies that our data indicates are trashing our community with plastic clearly have more than enough wherewithal to do better. The money they make in a single year is nearly equivalent to the net worth of the top eight richest people in the world.

Imagine how much money is banked by companies worldwide when they externalize the costs of their business model. Externalized costs are costs generated by businesses but paid by society as a whole. They result in companies taking maximized profits while offloading many of the real costs inherent in those profits—in the form of harm to people; use, loss and damage of the environment's limited resources; as well as ultimate disposal of goods—onto the rest of us. A study for the United Nations found that the cost of pollution and other damage to the environment caused by the world's biggest companies would wipe out more than one-third of their profits if they were held financially accountable.

Externalized costs mean that sometimes companies' revenues are artificially inflated by the fact that that don't have to pay the price for the plastic packaging they invented, designed, and manufactured to be recycled, dumped in a landfill, burned in an incinerator, picked up from the side of the road, or cleared from a clogged storm drain after its short lifespan. They let taxpayers pick up the tab.

Externalized costs mean that companies can make the air around plastic processing plants so toxic that it's 50 times the national average, but don't have to pay the medical bills when the surrounding communities die of cancer. They make the sick residents pick up the tab.

Externalized costs mean that if a plastic straw from a fast-food chain ends up lodged in a turtle's nose, it's likely none of their concern—unless it results in bad publicity.

Manufacturers have very little accountability for the packaging they produce and the damage they leave in their wake. It becomes *your* problem. It becomes *our* problem.

It's time for companies to pay the price.

Industry Investments Fall Far Short

The Alliance to End Plastic Waste, a membership organization made up of 55 of the world's biggest petrochemical producers and top plastic polluting companies (including the number-one on our list), formed recently to clean up plastic—but mainly, to clean up members' public images. The Alliance's five-year commitment of $1.5 billion into lackluster cleanup efforts, annualized, amounts to 0.03 percent of the revenues of the top ten companies on our list: In other words, nothing. Meanwhile, the industry is currently pouring $204 billion into more than 334 new petrochemical facilities to churn out more fossil fuels and plastic.

It's like trying to bail out a bathtub with a teaspoon while the tap is on full blast.

On the Ground in Gwinnett

Top 10 Plastic Products in Our Litter

RANK	ITEM	TOP COMPANIES & BRANDS
1	**Plastic bottles**	The Coca-Cola Co. (Coke, Dasani) PepsiCo (Gatorade, Aquafina) Kroger
2	**Plastic bags**	Kroger Walmart SC Johnson (Ziploc)
3	**Snack wrappers**	PepsiCo (Doritos, Cheetos) General Mills (Chex, Nature Valley) Kellogg's (Rice Krispies, Nutri-Grain)
4	**Cigarette butts**	Altria (Marlboro) R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. (Newport)
5	**Styrofoam cups**	Chick-fil-A QuikTrip McDonald's
6	**Plastic cups**	McDonald's Yum! Brands (KFC, Taco Bell) Dart Container (Solo Cup)
7	**Straws**	Unknown
8	**Candy wrappers**	Mars (Snickers, M&Ms) Hershey (Reese's, Jolly Rancher) Ferrero (Butterfinger, Trolli)
9	**Plastic-lined paper cups**	McDonald's Inspire Brands (Sonic, Dunkin') Culver's
10	**Styrofoam packing material**	Unknown

Focus: The Top 10 Plastic Products in Our Litter

Our volunteers audited plastic litter of all sorts, but the same products kept coming up over and over again. The top ten most commonly found types of products and packaging made up 83 percent of the total plastic litter. These items are known offenders, as they also appear in the annual lists of top ten findings at coastal cleanups around the world.

Plastic bottles took the top spot, making up 32 percent of our plastic litter hauls. While we didn't further distill our accounting of bottles by their contents, bottled water, soft drinks, sports drinks, wine, and hard liquor all made frequent appearances.

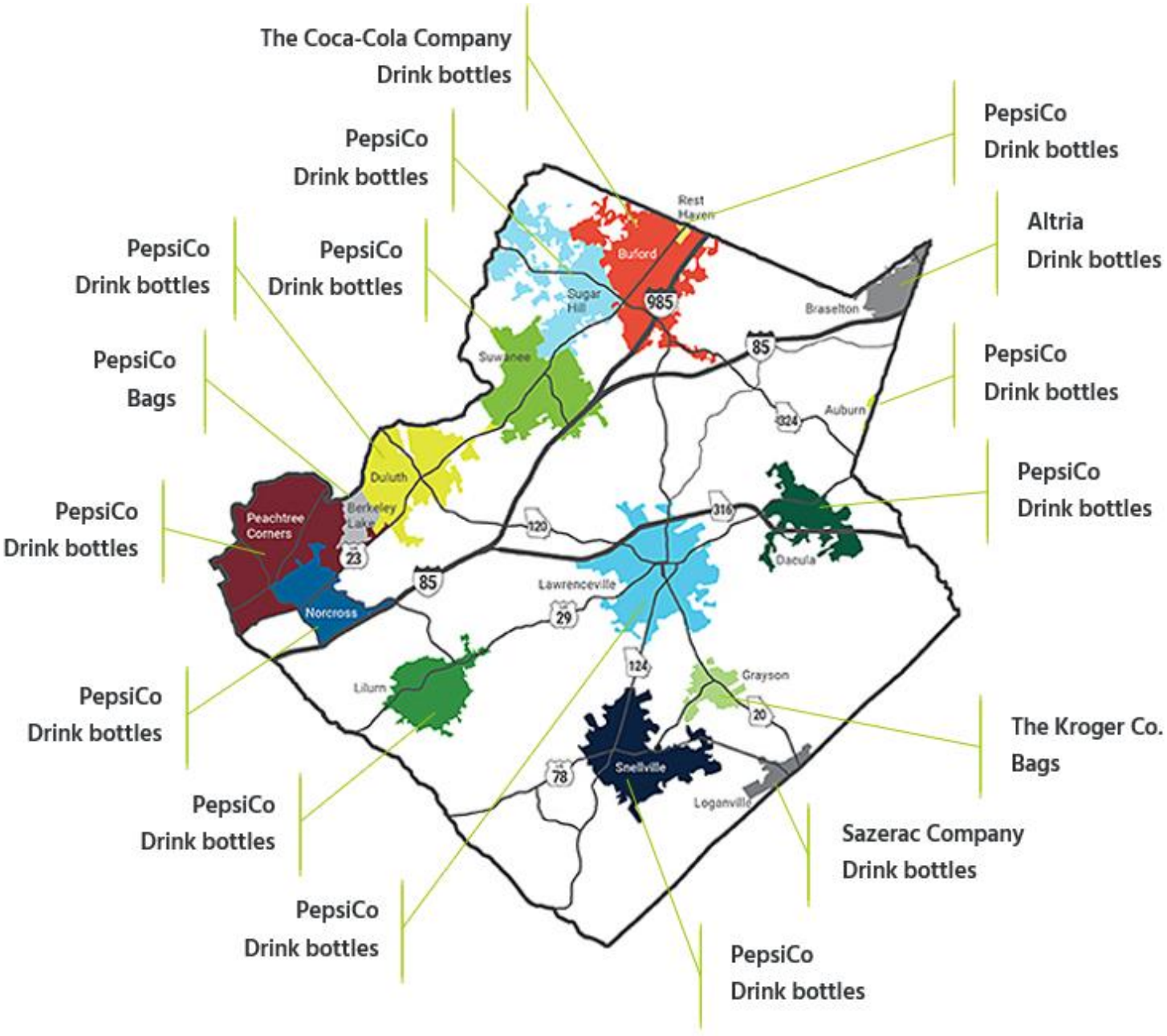
Globally, more than a million plastic bottles are sold every minute, and millions more are thrown away every hour. In the U.S., only 30 percent of plastic bottles are recycled, and one-third of those are recycled right here in Georgia by our carpet manufacturing industry, which often must import PET plastic from other states to meet demand. Although consumers of soft drinks dutifully returned bottles and collected the refund in the decades before PET was invented, beverage companies have opposed new bottle deposit legislation, arguing that container deposit laws cost them too much money. The reality is that the small incentive provided in deposit return systems, a refundable five- or ten-cent fee, really works to give otherwise end-of-life packaging greater perceived value. The ten U.S. states with bottle bills average a 60 to 89 percent beverage container recycling rate, and experience measurably less roadside litter. To increase recycling and mitigate litter, we need to consider implementing similar models for various packaging on a national scale.

Note: While The Coca-Cola Company uses more plastic and consistently ranks at the top of the international plastic polluter list, PepsiCo's extensive line of snacks in addition to beverages contributed to more litter in Gwinnett County. Popular brands that consumers may not realize are PepsiCo products include Aquafina, Gatorade, Propel, Mountain Dew, Naked, Lipton, Ocean Spray, and Tropicana, as well as Lays, Doritos, Cheetos, Ruffles, Fritos, Tostitos, Funyuns, SunChips, Miss Vickie's, Smartfood, Quaker, Sabra, and many more.

The Worst of the Worst

Foam and bags are the worst kinds of plastics we found on cleanups in terms of degradation. Expanded polystyrene plastic, known as "Styrofoam" and commonly found in drink cups and packing material, crumbles easily into small foam beads and leaches styrene, a suspected carcinogen. Plastic bags, wryly referred to as "urban tumbleweeds," are aerodynamic and known to easily blow out of trash bins, recycling bins, garbage trucks, and landfills, eventually getting washed into storm drains or stuck in bushes, trees, and bodies of water. Like foam, plastic film easily sheds into the environment. These two materials should be prioritized for reduction and elimination in our community and everywhere.

Top Brands and Plastics Littering Your City



For each city, the **#1 brand** and **#1 plastic item** are listed. See Appendix for details by city.

Take Action Guide: Major Brands

Action: Take accountability for your role in the plastic waste crisis.

We've had enough greenwashing, blame-shifting, and empty promises. Knowing the truth about plastic waste, we are neither comforted nor cajoled by lies about recyclability or by investments that amount to pocket change. We ask that all companies investigate and proactively reveal their total global plastic footprint, fully accounting for the impact of their products throughout their lifecycle, including emissions, toxicity, and disposal.

Action: Turn off the tap on single-use plastic.

Since we can't bail out the bathtub while the water is running, we need to turn off the tap. Companies and retailers must commit to urgently phasing out disposable plastic and moving away from single-use product design and delivery toward standardized refill and reuse systems. There is no shortage of examples globally of refill and reuse systems that are successful, safe, suited for a broad variety of products, and convenient for consumers.

Action: Get on board with Extended Producer Responsibility.

Manufacturers must take responsibility for the full lifecycle of the products they create instead of continuing to pass the buck to vulnerable populations, taxpayers, and the Earth itself. Companies should support extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs such as packaging deposit systems, in which consumers pay a refundable deposit on goods they purchase and producers assume the costs of collection, to deter litter and promote reuse.

Action: Invest real money in cleanup efforts.

Even if Styrofoam cups or plastic bags were removed from the marketplace tomorrow, we would still find them in the environment for decades and centuries to come. In addition to halting further production, brand leaders need to make authentic commitments and serious investments to clean up plastic waste that is already in the environment. The ongoing costs of cleanup in communities around the world should no longer be borne by taxpayers.

Action: Help make environmental sustainability mainstream.

All businesses have a powerful role to play in making environmental sustainability the norm in our society. This starts with making sustainability easy, accessible, and affordable, which big brands are best equipped to accomplish. The goal should be to make the safest and least environmentally impactful option the default option for consumers.

Why Do We Need Extended Producer Responsibility?

In the early days of household waste collection, most of the trash collected consisted of food scraps and ash from stoves and fireplaces. Just a tiny fraction was manufactured items. Today, more than 75 percent of municipal waste consists of manufactured products, such as plastic bottles. Having local governments cover the costs of disposing the tens of millions of pounds of manufactured goods is a tremendous unfunded mandate. It is one more factor enabling producers to make throwaway products and take in profits that don't reflect all the real costs to society.[5]

It's time for private industry to start picking up the tab for the impacts of their products over their full lifecycle, including end-of-life: Collection, recycling, and disposal. Making producers financially responsible for end-of-life product management gives them the incentive to be less wasteful from the start. If they are required to pay to recycle their products, they will be much more likely to design them for recyclability, choosing materials that are compatible with existing recycling streams. Such systems create an effective feedback loop that municipal recycling simply cannot.

The U.S. is one of the few developed countries on Earth without a national EPR law addressing packaging. The Break Free From Plastic Pollution Act of 2021, currently in Congress, would change that, implementing a national bottle collection refund and other common-sense measures to reduce plastic waste.

[5] From *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story* by Susan Freinkel

Take Action Guide: County and City Leaders

Action: Take responsibility for driving positive change.

Government is a powerful influencer. Local governments have an important role to play in reimagining the communities where we all live, work, and play into places where it is easy, convenient, and cost-effective for people to use less, reuse more, recycle, and compost; where businesses that serve those ends can thrive; where all producers take full responsibility for the things they create; and where natural resources are conserved.

Action: Make a commitment to the goal of zero waste.

Waste is increasing faster than any other environmental pollutant. To be proactive on this threat, communities around the world are embracing the aspirational goal of "zero waste." Communities working toward zero waste begin by evaluating current waste output, policies, programs, and facilities and setting time-bound goals for reducing municipal solid waste generation per capita and lessening the amount of trash disposed in landfills.

Action: Help turn off the tap on single-use plastic.

Bans or fees on the most harmful single-use plastic items can discourage their use and recover funds for the community. Retail establishments in Montgomery County, Maryland that provide customers a plastic or paper carryout bag at the point of sale are required to charge five cents per bag. The revenues from this charge are deposited into the local water quality protection fund, helping to reduce the burden of litter cleanup costs on taxpayers.

Action: Lead the community by example on waste reduction.

In 2019, Fulton County, Georgia commissioners unanimously agreed to end the purchase and use of plastic bags, straws, and Styrofoam in government buildings. The City of Atlanta soon followed suit. Leveraging the purchasing power of local governments can serve as a model for change, generate local economic activity around zero waste products and services, and shift a substantial portion of municipal waste streams.

Does Zero Waste Really Mean Zero?

Planning for zero waste doesn't necessarily mean not producing any waste. There are jurisdictional limits to what a municipality can do to reduce upstream waste production, although opportunities exist for our cities and large county to influence corporate actions and state policies. As with many other policies, zero waste is a journey, not a destination.

Take the goal of zero pedestrian fatalities, for example. The goal doesn't necessarily mean that policymakers believe that there will be no pedestrian deaths. Rather, it asserts that pedestrian fatalities are not acceptable and that leaders are taking action toward the ultimate goal of zero deaths. Zero waste builds the policies, programs, and infrastructure needed to get as close to a goal of zero as possible.

In addition to being a worthwhile goal for the environment, zero waste is an engine for economic development, estimated to create more than 200 times as many jobs as landfills and incinerators, with higher wages and more permanent positions.

The Zero Waste Masterplan: A Guide to Building Just and Resilient Zero Waste Cities provides a clear and comprehensive roadmap for municipalities and counties to reduce waste and drive economic growth.

Take Action Guide: Individuals

Action: Hold companies and government accountable to act.

Without urging from their customers or electorate, companies and governments can be slow to change. By boycotting the top littering companies, being vocal on social media, writing letters to commissioners and council members, using the power of your dollars to support zero waste businesses, helping family and friends understand the issues, and taking direct action such as doing a plastic audit, you have enormous power to effect change.

Action: Continue to reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost.

While the greatest imperative for change is on leaders in the private sector and government, we should still be proactive in shrinking our personal waste footprint. We can refuse to buy single-use disposable products—made of any material!—and opt for healthier, less wasteful reusable alternatives. We can repair, upcycle, recycle, and make it a priority to start composting, which is one of the most important ways to mitigate climate change.

Action: Pick up litter in the community to understand the crisis.

The lessons from this report will sink in better once you've experienced the blight of plastic litter firsthand. Seeing Styrofoam crumbling into bits that animals will mistake for food, or watching a plastic bag shed its toxins into a stream, are memorable experiences that can affect us far more than words. Join the community litter cleanup group Come Clean Gwinnett to connect with neighbors organizing cleanup events near you.

Action: Don't fall for greenwashing—support real solutions.

Be wary of deceptive corporate "greenwashing" efforts designed to win your cash and your loyalty. Greenwashing comes in the form of vague corporate sustainability commitments, unproven recycling technology, and initiatives that only replace plastic with another single-use material. Fight for powerful legislation and real solutions, like ending fossil fuel subsidies and making companies accountable for the lifecycle impacts of their products.

On the Ground in Gwinnett

Appendix: Top Brands and Plastics by City

Auburn

Mount Moriah Road

4/8/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. SC Johnson
4. McDonald's
5. Sazerac Company

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Snack wrappers
3. Styrofoam cups
4. Bags
5. Cigarette butts

Berkeley Lake

Peachtree-Industrial Boulevard

3/6/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. QuikTrip
3. The Coca-Cola Company
4. General Mills
5. Mars

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Bags
2. Cigarette butts
3. Drink bottles
4. Snack wrappers
5. Styrofoam cups

Braselton

Thompson Mill Road

4/3/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. Altria
2. Chick-fil-A
3. PepsiCo
4. The Coca-Cola Company
5. McDonald's

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Bags
3. Cigarette butts
4. Styrofoam cups
5. Snack wrappers

Buford

Cumming Hwy & Chattahoochee River

8/29/2020

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. The Coca-Cola Company
2. PepsiCo
3. Nestlé
4. Kroger
5. Walmart

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Bags
3. Cigarette butts
4. Styrofoam cups
5. Styrofoam plates

Dacula

Stanley Road & Apalachee River
2/20/2021 and 3/25/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. McDonald's
4. Walmart
5. Kroger

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Balls
3. Bags
4. Plastic cups
5. Snack wrappers

Duluth

Satellite Boulevard & Wetlands
11/7/2020

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. Walmart
4. Kroger
5. Nestlé

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Bags
3. Cigarette butts
4. Snack wrappers
5. Plastic cups

Grayson

Grayson Parkway & Rosebud Road

1/23/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. Kroger
2. PepsiCo
3. McDonald's
4. The Coca-Cola Company
5. Walmart

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Bags
2. Drink bottles
3. Snack wrappers
4. Cigarette butts
5. Plastic cups

Lawrenceville

Essex Drive

10/18/2020

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. Culver's
3. The Coca-Cola Company
4. Walmart
5. Nestlé

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Bags
3. Plastic cups
4. Cigarette butts
5. Straws

Lilburn

Five Forks Trickum Road & Yellow River

11/27/2020

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. QuikTrip
3. The Coca-Cola Company
4. Walmart
5. Kroger

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Snack wrappers
3. Styrofoam cups
4. Bags
5. Cigarette butts

Loganville

Harrison Road

3/13/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. Sazerac Company
2. Diageo
3. PepsiCo
4. The Coca-Cola Company
5. Heaven Hill Distilleries

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Cigarette butts
3. Snack wrappers
4. Styrofoam cups
5. Plastic cups

Norcross

Cemetery Field & Beaver Ruin Creek

11/14/2020

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. Walmart
4. Nestlé
5. QuikTrip

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Cigarette butts
3. Snack wrappers
4. Bags
5. Styrofoam cups

Peachtree Corners

Jones Mill Road & Crooked Creek

4/11/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. QuikTrip
4. Walmart
5. Kroger

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Styrofoam packing material
3. Bags
4. Snack wrappers
5. Styrofoam cups

Rest Haven

Bryant Road

11/20/2020

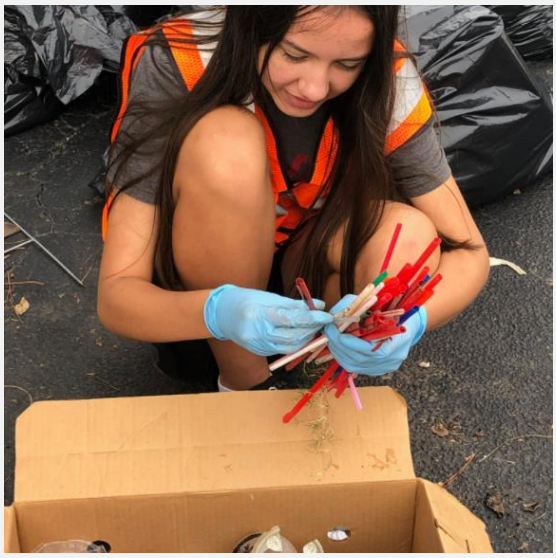
TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. Dart Container
3. Kroger
4. Niagara
5. QuikTrip

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Cigarette butts
3. Bags
4. Styrofoam cups
5. Plastic cups

Snellville



Highpoint Road

9/19/2020

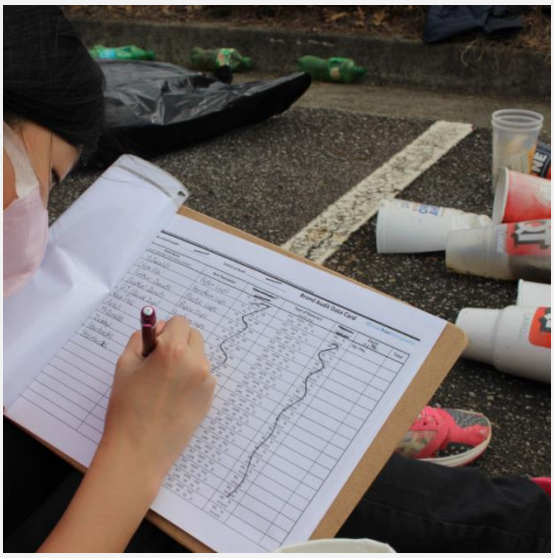
TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. Nestlé
4. Walmart
5. QuikTrip

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Straws
3. Styrofoam cups
4. Candy wrappers
5. Snack wrappers

Sugar Hill



Sycamore Road

3/21/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. McDonald's
4. Kroger
5. Nestlé

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Snack wrappers
3. Plastic cups
4. Bags
5. Paper cups

Suwanee

Peachtree-Industrial Boulevard

1/9/2021

TOP BRANDS COUNTED

1. PepsiCo
2. The Coca-Cola Company
3. QuikTrip
4. Niagara
5. Walmart

TOP PLASTICS COUNTED

1. Drink bottles
2. Bags
3. Snack wrappers
4. Styrofoam cups
5. Candy wrappers

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Chad Livsey Project

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City of Berkeley Lake

City of Braselton

City of Dacula

City of Grayson

City of Loganville

City of Suwanee

City of Sugar Hill

City of Peachtree Corners

Come Clean Gwinnett

Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful

Gwinnett County Police Department

Gwinnett County Department of Transportation

Gwinnett County Department of Water Resources

Gwinnett Soil and Water Conservation District

Yellow River Water Trail

We gratefully acknowledge the 125 citizen volunteers who invested their valuable time into picking up 5.34 tons of trash from the streets and waterways of Gwinnett County and logging 10,042 pieces of plastic waste. You made this project possible and successful.

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Angela B.
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Kim B.
Katha B.
Eliana B.
Nathan B.
Baiden B.
Vida B.
Bill B.
Ryan B.
Zachry C.
Eric C.
Kiernan C.
Angelia C.
Amy C.
Valentine C.
Marc C.
Bob C.
Linda C.
Cesar C.
Kelsey D.
Sarai D.
Tom D.
Suzy D.
Lorena D.
Natasha D.

Tixie F.
Julie G.
Natalia G.
Donna G.
Jim G.
Karen G.
Mike G.
Akot G.
Heather G.
Rhonda H.
McKenzie H.
Gloria H.
Michael H.
Larry H.
Kai H.
Brandon H.
Laura H.
Ben H.
Laurie H.
Glori H.
Clayton K.
Zander K.
Trey K.
Sarah K.
Ellis L.
Cara L.
Jennifer L.
Chad L.
Vinny M.
Angela M.
Mary M.
Stephen M.

Rebecca M.
Jennifer M.
Cari M.
Tom M.
Michael M.
Gary N.
Sabrina N.
Arthur N.
Franklin P.
Megan P.
Kevin P.
Nina P.
Liesel P.
Greg P.
Lata R.
Raja R.
Alana R.
Karina R.
Amy R.
Tim R.
Chris R.
Jason R.
Jessica R.
Sarah S.
Jasmine S.
Lisa S. and Family
Hayden S.
Tina S.
Ashley S.
Gracie S.
Jerrous S.
Tebor S.
Bill S.
Dennis S.
Donna S.
Chelsea T.
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Chris T.
Lena T.
Ting T.
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Cesar V.
Tadia W.
Amy W.
Virginia W.
Joyce W.
Taylor W.
Justin W.
Barbara W.
Mark W.
Fafnir Y.
Sylvain Y.
Aleah Z.
Allison Z.
Jason Z.
Mariana Z.
Martin Z.

Additional Resources

Reports

Branded: Break Free From Plastic's Global Plastic Brand Audit Report 2020

The New Plastics Economy: Rethinking the Future of Plastics and Catalyzing Action

Plastic & Health: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet

Toolkits

Single-Use Plastics: A Roadmap for Sustainability

The Zero Waste Master Plan: A Guide to Building Just and Resilient Zero Waste Cities

Books

The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health—and A Vision for Change by Annie Leonard

Plastic: A Toxic Love Story by Susan Freinkel

Plastic-Free: How I Kicked the Plastic Habit and How You Can Too by Beth Terry

Documentaries

The Story of Plastic

Bag It

Plastic China

Plastic Planet

Tapped

About Gwinnett Recycles

Gwinnett Recycles is a grassroots organization based in Gwinnett County, Georgia, U.S.A. Run 100% independently by passionate citizen volunteers, Gwinnett Recycles exists to improve society by helping keep valuable resources out of landfills and the environment.

www.gwinnettrecycles.com

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