

**Joint Environmental Task Force (The JET)  
Report of the Solid Waste and Recycling Subcommittee  
September 2020**

*Members of the Solid Waste and Recycling Subcommittee are Mason District Supervisor Penny Gross; Meg Mall, executive director of Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions; Susan Stillman, and Wendy Gao (student). Others participating as presenters or advocates were Eric Forbes, Solid Waste Division Manager; Elizabeth Ende, citizen; and Daphne Balotas, Jasmin Salous, and Jessica Butturff, Pre-K/Head teachers at Bailey's Elementary School.*

The subcommittee met several times, in person and virtually, between February and August 2020, to formulate recommendations for the JET report to the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Fairfax County School Board. We examined a number of approaches to reducing waste and increasing recycling, including a presentation by Pre-K/Head Start teachers at Bailey's Elementary School that focused on requirements that result in wasting resources, especially plastics mandated by federal regulations. Discussions with staff from the Solid Waste Division also were very helpful in determining current practices and industry operations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed some traditional approaches to Solid Waste and Recycling. With many offices closed, and people working from home, business trash has decreased significantly, but that decrease has been balanced with significant increases in residential trash and recycling. Fairfax County schools closed in mid-March 2020, and distance learning is planned for at least the first quarter in the Fall of 2020, so the normal waste cycles from schools (paper, cafeteria food waste) also changed. However, that situation is not expected to be long-term, so the recommendations listed below for schools are suggested for a time when teachers and students physically return to the classroom.

**Recommendation #1:**

Fairfax County government and schools should set an aspirational goal to be at zero waste-free by 2030.

**Recommendation #2:**

A plan for achieving zero waste by 2030 must be prepared by the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter of CY 2021 (by June 30, 2021). The plan would be prepared by staff, and should include staff ideas (possibly via a preliminary survey) about how to reduce the amount of waste in their offices/classrooms. Incentives should be considered for the best ideas.

**Recommendation #3:**

A trash and recycling audit should be planned and implemented to get a better idea as to what residents and businesses are throwing away and/or recycling. An audit would examine representative samples (e.g. 200 pounds) of trash and recycling with several staff dedicated to

sorting and examining over a period of several days. In the time of COVID-19, a trash audit would require full masks, Tyvek suits, etc., so there may be some additional budgetary and social distancing implications. A sample survey done by Solid Waste staff pre-COVID revealed that about a third of what is discarded could be recycled or reused.

**Recommendation #4:**

County government and schools should undertake a review of purchasing: what is being ordered and what is being used, especially paper supplies and other items that could be recycled, and develop a sustainable purchasing program, to include recycled content paper and plastics, elimination of single use plastics, etc. Of particular concern now is the number of expensive devices (laptops, cell phones, and other electronic peripherals) that are needed for teleworking, and how these items are handled when broken or obsolete. Although many devices still have value in the current market after the hard drive is wiped, E-waste must be considered and addressed.

**Recommendation #5:**

Composting is a simple, effective, and environmentally friendly activity that should be a significant part of any zero-waste plan. County government and schools should encourage expanded composting in both public and private venues, and should undertake a strong education program, in multiple languages, about waste and recycling for the general public.

**Recommendation #6:**

These recommendations focus on schools and, most likely, would need to be delayed until schools re-open to in-person classes:

- Find an advocate for recycling/reduction in each school
- Explore the Green Flag Program of the National Wildlife Federation
- Seek business sponsorships
- Find a model for sharing school supplies

Note: The subcommittee has additional information, if desired, about trash and recycling audit operations as well as Pre-K/Head Start requirements.