

Too Much Trash:

How charitable giving can help Vermonters generate less waste

THE TAKEAWAY

Vermont is generating more trash despite laws designed to curb the problem. Charitable individuals can help tackle the trash monster by supporting:

- Organizations that promote reuse, repair, and the low-waste lifestyle
- Advocacy for policy steps that will help reduce waste
- Partnerships with businesses and government on reuse



IT'S FRUSTRATING TO REALIZE that despite some of the most forward-thinking laws in the nation when it comes to recycling, composting, and the environment, Vermont has not lowered the volume of trash it sends to landfills. Instead, we're building bigger mountains of garbage and going in the wrong direction when it comes to state goals on waste reduction. Vermont residents produced 1,302 pounds of waste per capita in 2021, up from 1,251 in 2020. The increase puts us even further away from the state's "waste-trim" goal of 1,000 pounds per person by 2024.

Granted, there's some consolation in the fact that Vermont recycles and composts about 34 percent of total waste. But this number, known as the diversion rate, is supposed to hit 50 percent under

the state's 2024 targets. Instead, there's been no meaningful increase in the diversion rate over the past decade, according to the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation.

The unpleasant reality is that every pound of progress we make on recycling and composting seems to be undermined by the growing volume of unnecessary packaging, single-use plastics, and other disposable products flooding our lives and environment. In 2021, Vermont landfilled 420,334 tons of trash, an increase of 4.5 percent over the volume in 2020, state figures show. And the bad news doesn't stop there. A growing body of research from national environmental groups contends that most of the plastic thrown into the recycling bin cannot be recycled, period.

Unpacking the complexities of these trends is not an easy task and many of the nuances are under debate. But there is a simple truth that should unite us and motivate action: One of the best solutions to the garbage problem is to reject disposable products and the single-use plastic hydra and learn to generate less waste to being with. The thinking that a full recycling bin is the solution to our trash woes is increasingly outdated. More and more, environmental groups are recognizing that repurposing and generating less waste to begin with are key to reducing the trash mess that is polluting our lakes, oceans, land, and atmosphere.

**The trash problem
is not insurmountable.
We can fix it.**

For Burlington environmentalist Julie Silverman, who has helped document the presence of micro-plastics pollution at all levels of the Lake Champlain ecosystem, it's partly about returning to the Great Depression era motto she learned long ago from her grandmother: "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without." Granted, Silverman doesn't expect modern consumers to embrace the forced austerity of a historical period characterized by profound economic shock. But the old motto can be updated to apply to modern times and encourage individuals to be more careful consumers, whether that means rejecting single-use plastics that are used once and live in the environment for a thousand years, or repurposing and repairing goods rather than buying disposable wares. It also means questioning the sheer volume of what we may buy.

"We've just gone a little bit crazy. How much do we really need?" said Silverman, who works as the Lake Champlain Lake Keeper for the Conservation

Law Foundation, a nonprofit New England-wide environmental group whose Vermont office is based in Montpelier. She sees many signs of over consumption, including the ubiquity of storage units that her parents and grandparents didn't seem to need. "Why do we have all these storage units?" Silverman asked. "We keep buying so much stuff that we can't even keep it on our own property."

Charitable individuals can help Vermont make progress by supporting:

Reuse, repair, and low-waste living

Everything from refrigerators to computer laptops and construction salvage gets a new lease on life at ReSource: A Nonprofit Community Enterprise. The organization's four stores around the state take in goods and sell used and refurbished items. ReSource has also become an important job training center, taking what began as teaching people to fix things and expanding into training for high-paying fields such as construction, appliance repair, and the heating/mechanical sector.





With retail outlets in Burlington, Barre, Hyde Park and Williston, the nonprofit last year logged reuse sales of \$2.5 million, and diverted 706,836 items representing 745 tons of material from landfills. The operation has grown over 30 years from an enterprising idea in Burlington to a job training and reuse solution with 99 employees. Every year ReSource gives more than \$100,000 in goods to people in need, working with nonprofit organizations such as the Committee on Temporary Shelter (COTS).

“The sweet spot for us is where we can teach skills to disadvantaged people who need jobs, protect the environment, and relieve poverty. When we can do all three things at once, that’s a very powerful impact,” said Thomas Longstreth, ReSource executive director.

People realize their own life is contributing to the problem.

On a typical day, shoppers might include teen-agers browsing for bargain fashions, tiny home builders hunting for used cabinetry, or refugee families looking for an affordable kitchen table. Some shoppers are first-timers and others already have the reuse bug, in certain cases regardless of income, according to Longstreth. “They can afford to shop elsewhere but they love the hunt. It makes them happy to decorate a bathroom with recycled tile.”

ReSource works with private companies who hire the nonprofit to come on-site, wipe data off computers, and then take the entire lot for resale or recycling. It’s an example of the services ReSource has developed in response to emerging need, in some cases with support from donations. There’s another benefit, too: every time someone drops off an item or buys one at ReSource,

the organization helps build awareness of how individuals can make a difference to reduce society’s trash problem.

“People sometimes get to a point where they are passionate about the environment and then realize that their own life is contributing to the problem,” Longstreth said. “So, their New Year’s resolution might be to make big changes. Part of that is to shed stuff they don’t need or want any more and put it back into circulation for people who can use it.” Very soon, the nonprofit will offer an additional service. With the help of University of Vermont students, it will provide customers with a calculation of the carbon savings represented in each item they purchase. “In addition to the price of the item,” said Longstreth, “there will be an estimated carbon savings of buying that item versus buying something brand new.”

Many nonprofits are working toward similar goals. Goodwill Northern New England has multiple drop-off sites and retail stores that sell repurposed goods in Vermont. It also conducts job training and provides jobs, including for people with disabilities. Many environmental groups, including the Conservation Law Foundation, the Vermont Public Research Interest Group, and the Vermont Natural Resources Council, offer strategies on individual changes that can add up to less trash. Vermont’s municipal solid waste districts are also good outlets for information and for fresh ideas, whether that’s putting on a community “repair café” that teaches DIY repair skills or running a workshop on bulk grocery shopping.

Advocacy for policy steps to reduce waste

Vermont is doing some things right when it comes to reducing waste. It’s important to acknowledge that and generate discussion about additional steps, including through charitable giving to nonprofit organizations that are leading public policy discussions and, in some cases, supporting important research. Certain proposals

might not find public support, while others might advance. Either way, donations can help support a rich marketplace of ideas and the public debate needed to make progress and analyze the effectiveness of existing laws. On that note, it's encouraging to see that Vermont's law requiring composting of food scraps has been fully implemented and that Vermonters are keeping an estimated 70,000 tons of food and yard waste out of landfills. More progress: Vermont in 2020 banned grocery stores and other retailers from offering single-use plastic bags at check-out, legislation that the Vermont Public Interest Research Group (VPIRG) helped champion. It's encouraging to see that consumers have largely accepted the change, said Paul Burns, executive director of Montpelier-based VPIRG.

"When that law passed in Vermont it was the most comprehensive restriction on single-use plastics in the country," Burns said. "And you know what? The sky didn't fall. People made that transition remarkably well." VPIRG is working on additional proposals, including legislation to expand and modernize Vermont's bottle bill, which is an example of a law that requires manufacturers to take some responsibility for products they produce. This concept, known as extended producer responsibility, is increasingly being seen by environmental groups as the path to reduce waste and waste pollution. The burden for change cannot be placed simply on individual shoppers or consumers, Burns said. "We have to change the way that manufacturers think about it as well."

Consumers also need to understand that some materials are inherently problematic. Plastic equals toxic in many ways, from fossil fuels used to create it, to the additives it can contain, to the difficulty of recycling it without creating new environmental problems, Burns said. "Plastics are an environmental threat and we do ourselves a favor by reducing the use of plastic as much as possible."

Meanwhile, other groups, such as the Conservation Law Foundation (CLF), are also working on policies

that get to the source. One of the origins of microplastic pollution in Lake Champlain is the polystyrene material used in floatation systems for docks. It breaks down into millions of small particles that wash up on beaches, float in the water, and harm fish, marine birds, and other creatures. "Polystyrene has horrible chemicals in it that can affect human and animal health," said Silverman, at the Conservation Law Foundation, which is advocating for policy that reduces the polystyrene floatation system problem. CLF has also collaborated with nonprofits such as the Connecticut River Conservancy [to promote alternatives](#), including sealed air.



Dock foam in Malletts Bay, Lake Champlain.

Plastic debris of all kinds is sloshing around in Lake Champlain, Silverman added. "It's everywhere. All of our trash on land really does end up in the water and we see that result in the Lake." The scale of the problem is daunting, but she's convinced Vermont can make a difference, with new approaches that reduce unnecessary packaging and waste at the manufacturing level, and with smart personal decisions. "Individuals have purchasing power and we have choices about what products we buy," Silverman said. The trash problem is not insurmountable, she added. "We can fix it."



Partnering with businesses and government

Philanthropy can play a critical role when a concept needs a little help to get launched.

That was the case when the composting requirements that are part of Vermont's universal recycling law were phasing in. The rules required the state's municipal solid waste districts and transfer stations, which receive trash and recyclables, to start accepting food scraps, too, and create the infrastructure to do so. There was push back in certain parts of the state, with some local officials saying the law was an unfunded mandate, recalls Josh Kelly, the solid waste program manager at the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation.

Philanthropy can play a critical role when a concept needs a little help to get launched.

Ultimately state officials were able to harness philanthropic resources to cover some of the infrastructure expenses through a grant program created by the High Meadows Fund, now called the Daybreak Fund for Climate and Community Resilience, which is a component fund of the Vermont Community Foundation. The grants helped waste districts get set up for composting and in the process built more support for the law, according to Kelly. "It was a critical moment. Were it not for that surge in philanthropic dollars there would have been towns that were noncompliant," Kelly said. "It just really kind of put it over the hump."

Charitable individuals can also help by providing seed money, low-interest loans, and other financial support to private sector businesses that repurpose materials that might otherwise end up in landfills. By jumping into what is known as the mission investment movement, philanthropy can help support entrepreneurial efforts that create jobs and generate

environmental returns. One example can be found in Essex Junction. The start-up company Glavel is turning recycled glass into foam glass gravel, a green building material that can be used in construction and road projects. It's one of many innovative ventures supported by the [Vermont Mission Investment Pool](#) at the Community Foundation.

Glavel's work is especially timely now, because the market for recycled glass has mostly disappeared, Kelly said. "It's a major drag on the recycling system."

He'd love to see philanthropy and entrepreneurs collaborate more around waste reduction and reuse. For example, Vermont needs more recyclers of mattresses, which are bulky and don't compact well, making them problematic in landfills. There's one mattress recycler in Burlington, but the state needs more, Kelly said.

Deeper reading:

[Vermont 2021 Waste Disposal and Diversion Report, Agency of Natural Resources](#)

["Loopholes, Injustice and the 'Advanced Recycling Myth'"](#)

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