

## The History of Solid Waste Management in Gwinnett

Did you know that collecting and disposing of solid waste was not governed by any local, state or national regulations until the early 70's?

In 1970, Gwinnett County had a population of 72,350 citizens. As more people and businesses began to move here, more garbage was generated and no system was in place to properly collect or dispose of trash and garbage. Citizens had to haul their garbage to a dump or bury it on their own property. Many citizens just dumped their garbage on the side of the road. Gwinnett County realized that illegal dumping of waste was becoming a safety and health hazard. So, the Board of Commissioners took a bold step in 1973 to address this growing concern.

In November, 1973 the Board of Commissioners held a referendum to decide how solid waste should be handled in Gwinnett. The results of that vote guided the BOC to establish an exclusive franchise system for the collection and disposal of solid waste. Four districts were established and one private solid waste hauling company was granted permission to exclusively serve each area. There were 2 small independent companies providing unauthorized service in the northern part of the county.

In 1974, the State Constitution was amended to allow the County to continue the system they had established in 1973. The County did not take any action to re-enact an ordinance establishing the exclusive franchise system, nor was any action taken against the illegal haulers.

In order to obtain a franchise, companies were required to:

- File an application with the County
- Show proof of financial ability to serve area, for a minimum of 1 year
- Show proof of ability to meet the needs of the area and provide service that was in the best interest and welfare of the citizens
- Agree to provide twice weekly service in densely populated areas and once a week service in sparsely populated areas
- Provide once a week yard waste curbside pick up
- Dispose of all solid waste in an State Environmental Protection Division (EPD) approved landfill
- Pick up large bulky items, and charge for this service
- Renew their franchises annually

All collection fees were set by the Board of Commissioners. To change fees, a company was required to notify the BOC in writing and post bonds with the BOC. The BOC was required to hold a public hearing before any fee changes were made. The initial fee was \$6.00/month per household. Households were required to pay 3 months in advance to obtain service. Residents were not required to have garbage collection service.

Once collected most waste was taken to one of three privately owned and operated landfills located in Norcross, Lilburn, and Lawrenceville. Recycling was almost nonexistent, except for a few “junk and metal” yards.

By 1980, Gwinnett’s population had more than doubled to nearly 167,000 people. Many citizens found the extra cost for collection of large bulky items unacceptable. So, the illegal dumping of sofas, old furniture, construction debris, litter and even garbage became more noticeable. To address this issue, the County formed the Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Citizen’s Advisory Board and charged them with reducing the improper handling of waste and litter in the County. The Advisory Board immediately went to work and recommended that the County offer limited free dumping days at private landfills and begin a Spring and Fall pickup of large items from homes.

Citizens began to realize that many of the things they were throwing away could be recycled. In 1981, drop off points were set up at each Gwinnett County Fire Station for the collection of newspapers. The County designated Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful as the coordinator of this program. GC&B hired a recycling coordinator and soon additional drop off and buy back centers were established to meet growing demands.

In 1984, the Citizen’s Advisory Board recognized need for a more comprehensive recycling system. Citizens and businesses were looking for one place to take newspapers, aluminum cans, glass bottles and cardboard. The Recycling Bank of Gwinnett was built to meet this need and opened in 1986.

By the late 80’s, citizens and businesses were demanding even more convenient collection and recycling systems. The Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners took action to meet these needs and updated the solid waste system.

In October, 1989 a new system was put into place. The new system:

- Required all residents to use a private hauler (some minor exceptions)
- Granted 7 year exclusive franchises vs. 1 year to private haulers
- Increased the monthly fees to \$12.95/month, payable 3 months in advance with periodic price increases based on the Consumer Pricing Index
- Granted a \$8.00/month fee to the disabled and senior citizens
- Provided for Gwinnett County to collect any unpaid fees thru a levy against serviced property

Some members of the private solid waste sector found this system unacceptable. On May 4, 1990, Independent Sanitation, an unauthorized solid waste hauling company, filed a lawsuit against the County to address their concerns.

On July 16, 1990, a judge in the Gwinnett County Superior Court ruled that the County’s 1989 solid waste ordinance was unconstitutional and void for the following reasons:

- No constitutional authority was given to the Board of Commissioners to take the action they did
- No bids were taken and this lessened the competition and encouraged a monopoly

- Citizen were required to use a designated hauler, not select a hauler of their choosing
- The County could not act as a debt collector for a private company

The County was left with no structured solid waste system. Citizens were also expressing concerns because their rates had increased from \$12.95 to \$14.95 per month in a one-year period.

On July 24, 1990 the Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Citizen's Advisory Board was called upon by the Board of Commissioners to survey the public, research options for collection and offer recommendations to address long term solid waste issues. During 1990 the state and nation were also focused on solid waste issues. In 1990, Georgia passed the Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Act which required local communities to develop ten year solid waste plans. Nationally, new regulations came into effect for the design and long term operation of landfills.

The Advisory Board developed a strategy and undertook the following actions:

- Conducted an independent public attitude survey of 3,000 residents
- Held 9 town meetings throughout the County to obtain additional citizen input
- Held a strategic planning session with the private sector to discuss options
- Conducted research to determine best practices in other communities
- Conducted an inventory and assessment of all solid waste management programs
- Held a Community Symposium to learn from experts
- Began work on a draft solid waste plan

Citizens said they wanted an open market system that allowed them more choice in who provided their service and more convenient options for recycling.

Based on citizen input and identified needs, the Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Citizen's Advisory Board offered a recommendation to the Gwinnett County Board of Commissioners. The recommendation was to address the immediate need for collection of solid waste and included the following suggested actions:

- Adopt a new solid waste ordinance that establishes non-exclusive franchise system for the collection of residential and commercial solid waste
- Establish a pre-qualification process for all potential franchisees to ensure reliability in service, financial ability to perform required services, and proof of approval by EPD to provide collection service
- Create 7 service zones (change from 4)
- Require uniform rate structure for all households within a service zone
- Require all residential haulers to provide once per week collection of residential waste
- Require all residential haulers to provide curbside collection of 5 recyclables
- Require all residential haulers to provide pick up of large bulky items and yard waste

The program began in July, 1991. 8 residential haulers began service to 64,900 customers and 9 commercial haulers provided service to 4,758 customers. The costs for once per week collection of residential waste, every other week curbside collection of 5 recyclables, pick up of large bulky items and yard waste averaged \$8.00 - \$13.00 per month per household.

The Recycling Bank of Gwinnett was expanded during this time to meet hauler needs for processing and marketing of recyclables and to keep the costs down for citizens.

The Citizen's Advisory Board and GC&B staff continued work on the draft solid waste management plan. After extensive research and public input, a proposed plan was presented to the Board of Commissioners on June 2, 1992. Several cities expressed interest in being part of the County's plan. So, the draft plan was amended to include the Cities of Berkeley Lake, Dacula, Duluth, Grayson, Lawrenceville, Lilburn, Norcross, Rest Haven and Suwanee. A 10-Year Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan was submitted to the State for approval and was adopted on July 20, 1993.

In 1996, the State amended the Georgia Solid Waste Management Act to require the separate collection of leaves, grass clippings, limbs and brush. This was in response to growing national concerns about available landfill space. GC&B conducted extensive research to determine what system would best meet our community needs. Research showed that only about 9% of the households in Gwinnett were using curbside pick up of these items. Public attitude surveys showed that citizens would be willing to pay extra for this additional service. An amendment was made requiring haulers to collect yard waste, but allowing them to charge extra for the service.

Periodic 5-year reviews of the County's plan have been conducted and annual analysis of trends has been compiled. Today we have 8 residential haulers serving 138,600 households and 8 commercial haulers serving 7,800 accounts. Residential collection fees range from \$16 to \$20 per month for trash collection, recycling and bulky item pick-up. Yard waste service is available for an additional \$5-\$10 per month. The majority of all waste is disposed of outside the county.

After more than 10 years, an extensive inventory and assessment of all solid waste programs in the County is needed. The Board of Commissioners has once again called on the Gwinnett Clean & Beautiful Citizen's Advisory Board to undertake this task to review and possibly revise the County's plan and ordinance. This effort will help to ensure that Gwinnett continues to have a comprehensive solid waste system that ensures the safety, health and livability of our community.