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Tennessee can start small and think big on recycling | Opinion

Simple recycling habits can preserve landfill space, supply Tennessee businesses with valuable materials and build a stronger economy.

Donna Barrett Guest Columnist

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Every year, Tennesseans bury money. Aluminum, cardboard, paper and plastic that could be sold and remade end up in the ground instead. By one national estimate, about $162 million worth of recyclable materials are buried in Tennessee landfills every year. Those same landfills are losing capacity quickly.

The fix starts with knowing what to recycle and where.

Opinion: Why Nashville can't afford to ignore composting

Many Tennesseans want to do their part but find the process so confusing that they give up and toss everything in the trash. What can I recycle? What goes in the bin? Where do I take it, and when? That confusion is why I launched Recycle Right TN (recyclerighttn.com) as chairman of the Central Tennessee Regional Solid Waste Planning Board.

The website gives residents of Rutherford, Cannon, Warren and Coffee counties a central place to learn how to properly handle specific materials, find convenience center locations and hours, and locate drop-off sites for other items.

Love crosswords? Explore the Crossword page and play the new MidGrid Crossword.

Tennessee's landfill crisis is hitting home

For me, this issue is personal. I live in Rutherford County, home to Tennessee’s largest landfill. The impact of Middle Point Landfill on my community moved me to take on this problem statewide. In Murfreesboro, the capacity crisis has become dire, and our community can’t sustain another landfill expansion. Every can, box and bottle we keep out of the ground buys us time.

Opinion: Tennessee is ready for its next chapter in energy innovation

Recycling also presents a huge economic opportunity. Much of what we throw away is raw material, and businesses in our state have said they would buy more if Tennessee could collect enough. Aluminum producers here have told lawmakers they could use far more recycled metal than the state now provides. The market exists. What’s missing is supply, and that starts in our kitchens, offices and schools.

As a member of the state Advisory Task Force on Solid Waste and as its representative to the Recycling Market Development and Diversion Advisory Council, I am helping find ways to divert more material from landfills and into the hands of businesses that need it.

Recycling right starts with education

None of these efforts succeed without education. The best system fails if people don’t know how to use it. That is why the council is discussing, among other things, ways to teach Tennessee’s youngest residents not only why recycling matters but how to do it right. Habits formed in childhood last into adulthood. Parents and teachers can start by exploring Recycle Right TN with their kids.

Tennessee ranks 48th in residential recycling, and we generate 32% more waste per resident than the national average. My goal is not just to climb that list but for Tennessee to become a national leader.

What Tennesseans can do right now

America Recycles Day is Nov. 15. I'm asking every Tennessean to make two commitments. First, spend five minutes learning what your community accepts. In our four counties, Recycle Right TN has the answers. Second, pick one item you usually throw away, such as an aluminum can or cardboard, and recycle it every time. Then add another.

Small changes add up. Together, they keep our landfills open longer, supply Tennessee businesses with the materials they need and build a stronger economy for the next generation.

Donna Barrett serves as chair of the Central Tennessee Regional Solid Waste Planning Board. She serves on the state Advisory Task Force on Solid Waste and represents the task force on the Recycling Market Development and Diversion Advisory Council. Barrett is a former member of the Tennessee House of Representatives, serves on the Tennessee State Election Commission and is a member of Gov.-elect Marsha Blackburn's transition team.