

July Meeting Summary: The Nitty Gritty of Recycling with Robin Graham

7-25-2025 at the Clinton Community Center

Robin Graham got down and dirty with us on the subject of recycling in the City of Oak Ridge. She reported that 85-90% of the items placed in the brown curbside recycling bins are actually recycled. Oak Ridge is the only municipality in Anderson County to have curbside recycling. These are two facts we should be proud of! Her presentation slides can be found on the [ACDWC Events page](#).

Although there is a market for recycled glass, glass is not allowed in the curbside bins. The machines that separate the materials can't handle the glass, and broken glass is very hazardous for the workers handling the materials that come off the trucks. There is a good market for recycled glass however. Blount County has their own glass crusher – with the crushed glass used in road construction. There is also a good market in the glass and ceramics industry since glass is essentially silica, a basic compound they use in their products.



Aluminum cans are very valuable, but the aluminum pie pans and foil are not recyclable at this time. There is also a booming market for cardboard and paper. Paper and cartons with staples, envelope windows, milk cartons, Starbucks cups, and even slightly dirty pizza boxes are OK.

Plastics are a bit tricky. There is a great market for #1 and #2 plastics; however, the remaining plastics do not have a market and are sent to the landfill. Recycling that is placed in a plastic bag is not opened – the entire bag goes to the landfill. Plastic bags, bubble wrap, and plastic films (dry cleaner bags & shrink wrap) can be taken to bins in some of the local grocery stores where they will be bundled with the store's own packaging waste and sent to commercial recyclers.

The Staples store accepts the types of items that they normally sell for recycling, such as devices (printers, chargers, hard drives, mobile phones, etc.), printer cartridges, monitors (for a fee), batteries, luggage and cases, and school supplies.

Robin visited the impressive operation of the sorting plant. The materials are spread on conveyor belts, and the ferrous metals are picked up using magnets. The plastic is

separated out with blowers. And the aluminum, cardboard, and paper is manually pulled out. Items like ropes and bags with rope handles can really cause problems as they get caught in so much moving machinery.

The TN Waste to Jobs Act was introduced in the last TN Legislature's session, but was pulled for a lack of support. The forward thinking members will reintroduce the bill in 2026. The bill requires manufacturers to share the responsibility for their products, including the packaging. It shifts the costs away from cities that must support landfills back to the manufactures – encouraging them to produce packaging that can be recycled or minimized. It should not be a surprise that there is lobbying against the bill from landfill operators and Tennessee bottlers who already pay a 3% tax to fund litter collection.

There are things we can do to increase recycling. We can select products with recyclable (or minimal) packaging, make good use of our curbside bins, take what is not allowed to the grocery store, a glass collection station, or other collection facility. And encourage others, especially those living in buildings where there are not curbside bins, to make the time to go to a recycling center. And, please do not put curbside recycling in a plastic bag!

Robin Graham is currently the Chairperson of the Oak Ridge City Environmental Quality Advisory Board (EQAB), which she was appointed to in January 2023. In late 2024, EQAB decided to look into recycling in Oak Ridge, and is now working to increase adoption.

Robin has her doctorate in Forest Ecosystem Science from Oregon State University. She worked at ORNL in the Environmental Sciences Division as a scientist and a manager for many years, and then at Argonne National Lab outside of Chicago – retiring from ANL in 2019. In 2022, Robin and her husband, Jack Graham, moved back to Oak Ridge. Robin raised two daughters who are now living in Washington D.C. and Madison WI. She is also on the Oak Ridge League of Women Voters Board and is President of the Oak Ridge Chorus.