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'It's bad': County, community members seek solutions to litter problem

By Jenna-Ley Harrison jharrison@journalscene.com Mar 21, 2018 Updated Mar 22, 2018



Volunteers pick up litter in and around the waterway during an Ashley River Cleanup event on March 3.

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In the span of a few hours this month, county staff and volunteers cleared the Ashley River of nearly three tons of litter. Tires, wooden pallets, toys and other items were found scattered in and around the banks of the historic and scenic waterway, said county officials.

Keeping the river and county free of trash is a relentless effort that Charles Shutt hopes he and willing community members can continue.

"It's so unsightly in a town like Summerville," he said.

The recycling and education coordinator for Dorchester County, Shutt said litter is a growing problem locally. His vision is to control the issue through added volunteers and increased education, in schools and the community, on how to proactively care for the environment.

County officials said close to 100 volunteers from Summerville Saltwater Anglers, Charleston WaterKeeper, American Rivers, Keep Dorchester County Beautiful, Biggby Coffee, and local Scout groups participated in the March 3 effort.

At this month's Ashley Scenic River Advisory Council meeting, Shutt presented the cleanup's data and statistics from other local trash removal initiatives in the area. The numbers proved shocking.

"It's bad," Shutt said more than once during the presentation.

The "astronomical amount" of litter collected from the river event alone included 50 tires, along with toys, televisions, wooden pallets and other driftwood Shutt said he thought might've stemmed from a dock destroyed in an earlier flood event.

He also theorized on the source of the tires.

"I think it's businesses that generate more tires than (they) can deal with," Shutt said.

But tires are also popping up along roadways and other spots around the county.

"People are just rolling these tires right off the back of their (cars) into the road, I guess," Shutt said.

And unfortunately the river cleanup merely put a dent in the dilemma, Shutt said; he emphasized the need for more organized abatement help. He said the issue is puzzling because the county operates 14 convenience sites for dumping trash and recycling. Visit the county website for a full list.

"We have places here in the county where you can take it," Shutt said.

Another recent cleanup along Central Avenue netted three tires and more than 2,700 pounds of trash, divided among 110 bags, said county officials.

Scoring sites

Litter cleanup volunteers have also been targeting shopping centers, Shutt said. It's all a part of a new index survey of county litter—an initiative headed by Keep Dorchester County Beautiful.

Through the survey, volunteers evaluate and identify a litter score for local business parks, shopping centers and other commercial spots, county officials said. The group will then determine, based on scores, what areas need mitigation or further investigation from Codes Enforcement officers and county's Litter Control officials.

Shutt said it's been rare, since the survey's start, that a business has failed to make immediate improvements.



Tires and wooden pallets were among the 2.14 tons of litter collected during the river cleanup.

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Most of the trash collected—some in creeks—have come from drainage ditches and canals, which clog during rain and wind events and eventually send items downstream into rivers and marshes, county officials said.

Other than tires, the bulk of the trash has been glass bottles, fast food cups, aluminum cans and plastic bags, which is a concern to county staff on a deeper level. Shutt said microplastics can end up invading the food and water supply—over time affecting people’s health.

“When you throw (down) your plastic bag in the parking lot it goes down into the stormwater,” he said.

George McDaniel, chairman of the Scenic River Council, expressed similar fears.

“The result is that unless that plastic is burned or recycled, all of it ever produced is still here, deposited in the earth or cycling through the earth and water and into living organisms,” he said. “The plastic nurdles that made up the plastic cup you drank from 20 years ago and threw out a car window still exist.”

A nurdle is a small piece of plastic used to manufacture plastic products.

Shutt said he thinks the issue is cultural in nature and change starts with younger generations.

“(Litter has) been around for years and years and years, and we need to change that culture,” he said.

At least once a month Shutt goes into classrooms, talks about community cleanups and promotes good stewardship of the environment.

“Kids are usually very receptive to this type of idea,” he said.

Help wanted

In addition to education, more Good Samaritans are needed to volunteer their time picking up litter. One suggestion is to enlist the aid of Dorchester County inmates. It’s an idea Berkeley County already carries out, and according to Dorchester County Sheriff L.C. Knight, a former initiative of his agency.

Knight said when he first took office in 2009, the sheriff’s office had a part-time person come in on weekends to oversee litter cleanup. But the effort stopped when the person left.

Since then, Knight said he's struggled to find someone to watch over inmates working along area roadways. Plus, Knight said inmates require insurance coverage in case of a snake bite or other emergency.

"I've had a problem finding someone to come in and supervise," he said.

But Knight is not opposed to re-implementing a program. He praised its past results and said he would start it up again "if I had the personnel in place."

"I would do that. I thought they did a good job," Knight said. "Rather than put them in jail for 30 days, (inmates) would come in on weekends and continue their life and job."

Shutt said recently Berkeley County high school students asked to clean up the road surrounding Gahagan Park, and he's personally helped clear the town of "thousands" of cigarette butts.

"That's a pet peeve of mine," Shutt said.

Adopt-A-Spot Program

Shutt also hopes soon the county can jumpstart its new Adopt-A-Spot program—an effort already in place in other communities nationwide. Upon request, Keep Dorchester County Beautiful—which in December received a grant, from its umbrella group Keep South Carolina Beautiful, to implement the program—recommends to volunteers a certain county spot in need of litter abatement and beautification.

County officials said beautification projects can range from simple flower planting to installing park benches—anything an area needs to improve its ascetics. The program will initially identify 12 spots.

In addition, Shutt said groups will be asked to commit to two years of routinely cleaning up a location; each year the county will oversee nine total cleanups. Keep Dorchester Beautiful will also supply volunteers with all necessary supplies and a free training/safety seminar. Once adopted, the spot will also showcase a sign with the volunteer name(s).

County officials said Keep Dorchester County Beautiful is currently seeking to fill board chair and vice chair positions. Anyone interested can email resumes and cover letters to cshutt@dorchestercountysc.gov.

Changing legislation

According to Shutt, the S.C. General Assembly is considering amending current state law on litter dumping. If passed, the amendment would lessen the penalty/fine for littering—equating it to a traffic ticket—but also impose stiffer penalties for anyone caught dumping cigarette butts or animal carcasses.

Overall, Shutt said the legislation would give officers greater authority to issue more tickets for littering, without enforcing the formerly strict punishment.

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