



WHITEPAPER

What Actually Happens to Your Trash

The journey from your curb to its final destination - and why your choice of hauler matters more than you think.



COLLECTION



TRANSPORT



SORTING



RECOVERY

Introduction

Every week, you wheel your bin to the curb, the truck comes, and your trash disappears. But have you ever wondered what happens next? Where does it all go? How long does it take to break down? And does your choice of waste hauler make any difference?

The answers might surprise you. The waste industry is a complex system involving collection, transfer, sorting, disposal, and - when done right - resource recovery. Understanding this process helps you make smarter choices about what you throw away, how you throw it away, and who you trust to handle it.

4.9 lbs

TRASH PER PERSON PER DAY

292M

TONS OF WASTE PER YEAR (US)

50%

COULD BE DIVERTED FROM
LANDFILLS

The Journey Begins: Collection Day

When our trucks arrive at your home, your waste enters a carefully managed process. Residential trash and recycling are collected separately - this matters more than most people realize. Once recyclables are mixed with regular trash, contamination makes recovery significantly harder.

Our drivers follow optimized routes through neighborhoods in East Cobb and Marietta, minimizing fuel consumption and road wear. A single residential route can cover 150 to 200 homes, collecting several tons of material per run.

What Happens in the Truck

Modern collection trucks compact waste as they go, reducing volume by roughly 60%. This means fewer trips to the disposal facility, less fuel burned, and lower environmental impact. Trash and recycling are always kept in separate vehicles - never mixed.

The Transfer Station

After collection, trucks deliver their loads to a transfer station - a large facility where waste from multiple routes is consolidated into larger, long-haul vehicles. This step is crucial for efficiency. Instead of dozens of collection trucks making the long drive to a landfill, a few transfer trucks carry the equivalent load.

At the transfer station, material is weighed, inspected, and sometimes sorted. Hazardous or prohibited items that slipped through are identified and separated. This is one of the last checkpoints before waste reaches its final destination.

The Landfill: Engineered, Not Just a Dump

Modern landfills are nothing like the open dumps of decades past. They're engineered containment systems, built to strict EPA and state environmental standards.

How a Modern Landfill Works

- **Liner system:** Multiple layers of clay and synthetic materials prevent waste and liquids from reaching groundwater
- **Leachate collection:** Liquid that filters through waste is captured, piped out, and treated before release
- **Gas recovery:** Decomposing organic waste produces methane. Many landfills capture this gas and convert it to energy
- **Daily cover:** Each day's waste is compacted and covered with soil to reduce odor, pests, and wind-blown litter
- **Monitoring wells:** Groundwater around the landfill is tested regularly for contamination

Did you know? Cobb County's waste goes to facilities that capture landfill gas for energy generation. The methane from your banana peels and food scraps can literally power homes.

How Long Does It Take to Decompose?

Landfills are designed to contain waste, not break it down quickly. The lack of oxygen, sunlight, and moisture means decomposition is extremely slow.

- **Banana peel:** 2-5 weeks
- **Paper bag:** 1 month
- **Cotton t-shirt:** 6 months
- **Plywood:** 1-3 years
- **Aluminum can:** 80-200 years
- **Plastic bottle:** 450+ years
- **Glass bottle:** 1 million+ years
- **Styrofoam:** Essentially never

This is why recycling and waste reduction matter so much - the things we throw away today will outlast us by centuries.

The Recycling Path

When you place items in your recycling bin, they take a completely different journey than regular trash. Recyclables go to a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), where they're sorted by type.

Step 1: Arrival & Pre-Sort

Recycling loads are dumped onto a conveyor belt. Workers remove obvious contaminants - plastic bags, food waste, things that shouldn't be there.

Step 2: Mechanical Sorting

Screens, magnets, and air jets separate materials by size, weight, and magnetic properties. Paper goes one way, plastics another, metals a third.

Step 3: Optical Sorting

Infrared sensors identify different plastic types (#1, #2, etc.) and sort them into separate streams for processing.

Step 4: Baling & Shipping

Sorted materials are compressed into bales and sold to manufacturers who turn them into new products - bottles become fleece, cardboard becomes new boxes, aluminum cans become new cans in as little as 60 days.

The Contamination Problem

Here's the uncomfortable truth: **about 25% of what people put in recycling bins isn't recyclable.** Greasy pizza boxes, plastic bags, food-contaminated containers, and glass (not accepted in Cobb County's single-stream program) all contaminate the recycling stream.

When contamination is bad enough, an entire truckload of recycling may be sent to the landfill instead. Your good intentions end up making zero difference.

Quick rule: When in doubt, throw it out. One contaminated item can ruin an entire batch. Check our recycling guide at faq.trashtastic.com for the full list of what Cobb County accepts.

Why Your Hauler Choice Matters

Not all trash companies handle waste the same way. The differences come down to three things:

1. Separate Collection

Some haulers mix trash and recycling in the same truck to save money on routes. This sends everything to the landfill regardless of what you sorted. A responsible hauler keeps streams separated from curb to facility.

2. Route Efficiency

Local haulers who serve concentrated areas burn less fuel per household than national chains running sprawling routes. Fewer miles = lower emissions = less road damage in your neighborhood.

3. Accountability

When your hauler is local, you can call a real person. Missed pickup? You'll hear back the same day, not navigate a national call center. Local operators have a reputation to maintain in the communities they serve.

What You Can Do

Reduce First

- Buy products with less packaging
- Choose reusable bags, bottles, and containers
- Compost food scraps - this alone can reduce your household waste by 30%
- Donate usable items instead of tossing them

Recycle Right

- Only put accepted items in your recycling bin (check the Cobb County list)
- Rinse containers - food residue contaminates the batch
- Flatten cardboard boxes to save space
- Keep plastic bags OUT of the recycling bin (return them to grocery stores)
- No glass in Cobb County curbside recycling

Dispose of Special Items Properly

- **Electronics:** Certified e-waste recyclers or county drop-off events
- **Paint & chemicals:** Cobb County Household Hazardous Waste facility
- **Batteries:** Many retailers offer battery recycling bins
- **Bulk items:** Schedule a bulk pickup rather than leaving items curbside

The Bigger Picture

Americans generate more trash per capita than any other country. But the trend is shifting. Communities that invest in education, proper infrastructure, and responsible waste hauling see measurable reductions in landfill use.

Every household that recycles correctly, reduces waste, and chooses a responsible hauler contributes to that shift. It's not about being perfect - it's about being informed.



Reduce

Less packaging, more reusables.
Compost food scraps to cut waste by 30%.



Recycle Right

Only accepted items. Rinse containers. No plastic bags.
When in doubt, throw it out.



Choose Local

Local haulers mean separate collection, efficient routes, and real accountability.

Ready to Make a Difference?

TrashTastic serves East Cobb and Marietta with separated collection, reliable weekly service, and real people who answer the phone. No contracts required.

trashtastic.com | (470) 664-3100 | Starting at \$29/month

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