

Carpet Recycling a Win-Win

While carpet recycling has yet to become a mainstream sustainable process across Tennessee, it is doing some serious landfill diverting in Knox County. Since partnering with Southeastern Recycling last August, Knox County Solid Waste has recycled 99.5 tons of carpet and carpet padding that previously would have been sent to a Class III landfill.

Knox County Recycling Coordinator Zach Johnson first found out about Southeastern Recycling after overhearing talks of their attempts to partner with the City of Knoxville's transfer station. While that partnership fell through, Johnson was excited by the potential of such a partnership with the county.

"Just from my experience working at convenience centers I knew that would be an awesome idea to have at our centers," said Johnson, referring to his time as a center operator at one of the county's seven convenience centers where Knox County residents can dispose of household garbage, DIY construction and demolition waste, and recyclables for free.

Johnson reached out to Knoxville Southeastern Recycling manager Chase Chaffin, who was more than happy to partner with the county. Chase opened the Knoxville branch of Southeastern Recycling in September 2013 looking to expand on the success that his father, Chad Chaffin, found in Nashville.

Southeastern Recycling, LLC, was born in 2000 after Chad bought the small business that a couple of "pad-scraper" friends were looking to sell. Originally just collecting carpet pads, Chad expanded to include whole carpets in 2006 when he realized there was a recycling market for the top-layer fibers, which he could easily get from current customers.

In that first year of collecting carpet, Chad estimates that he pulled in 6-7 million pounds. Southeastern has since grown from 4 to 5 carpet pad customers, to servicing 100+ carpet accounts, including some as far away as Alabama and Indiana. They now divert roughly 20 million pounds of carpet from landfills each year.

Confident that they could find similar success in Knoxville, Chase and his wife Carly opened a second Southeastern

Recycling location off of North Cherry Street in Knoxville. The Chaffins chose Knoxville because it was a big city "not too far from home," with several pre-established clients. In their first full year of collecting carpets, Knoxville's Southeastern Recycling collected 3,024,000 pounds of carpet.

While that is a significant amount—and every bit counts when it comes to landfill diversion—the Chaffins are convinced they could, and should, be getting much more. "We should be able to keep 10 million [pounds] out of the landfill in Knoxville," said Chad.

Chase explained that the biggest challenge they've been facing is convincing local carpet stores to get on board with recycling. Despite no disposal fees—and the environmental benefits—many stores are continuing to send their unwanted used carpet to the landfill.

"People are creatures of habit," Chase acknowledges. "They're used to taking it to the landfill."

Fortunately the county's convenience centers are consistently diverting private carpet disposal. "We get material from the County we wouldn't get otherwise," said Chase. "It keeps us going, especially in the slow months."

And the county benefits as well. While landfill diversion is the big picture goal, diverting from the construction and demolition (C&D) containers improves the day-to-day operation of the convenience centers.

Johnson explains: "Bulky (C&D) containers fill up really quickly, mostly from carpet and mattresses, and carpets tend to jam up the compactors."

Collecting carpet in a separate container allows the C&D box to fill up more slowly and get pulled less often, making it available longer in the day for more people to use.

"It's not only a way to recycle, but a way to pull out C&D waste and to help out the operator," explains Johnson. "It's a win-win for everybody."

Johnson said carpet recycling has been so successful for the county at the two convenience centers that are currently participating that he plans on expanding to three more centers within the year, as space and supervision allows.

If the trend continues, someday soon Tennessee could become known for turning landfills of carpet into fencing, decking, underground water storage tanks, the automotive industry, and of course... more carpets. [TDW](#)

