

Litter Report Tri-Cities*

Tri-Cities, Washington August 2025



July 25, 2025. Volunteers collect litter along I-395 in Kennewick.

This group (members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) organizes cleanups each year through WSDOT's Adopt-A-Highway program.



Author: J. Heerink
Sustainable Tri-Cities
www.alsctc.org

Sources used and/or feedback from:
WSDOT: Jessica Missett
Dept of Ecology: Amber Smith, Monica Martinez
Kennewick Police Department
Richland/Kennewick/Pasco Parks & Rec Departments
2022 [WA Litter report](#) - Cascade Consulting
Dept of Ecology Loans & Grants [2014 - Current](#)

*The information in this document is based on observations and is not presented as an official study. Its purpose is to help inform and support discussion on more effective strategies for litter cleanup and prevention.

Contents

- 3. Intro
- 5. Current cleanup efforts
- 7. The Tri-Cities litter problem
- 9. Reaching a 'zero litter' goal...what has worked?
- 12. Benchmark programs

APPENDIX I - Tri-Cities litter cleanup map

APPENDIX II - Literati results Tri-Cities 2023

APPENDIX III - Litter violation scene Pasco

APPENDIX IV - Op-Ed letter in Tri-City-Herald May 2025

Intro

As a representative of *Sustainable Tri-Cities*—a nonprofit dedicated to educating the community about environmental stewardship—I have helped organize annual litter cleanups along the Sacajawea Trail, in partnership with the bicycle advocacy group *Bike Tri-Cities*.

While these efforts are valuable, the task often feels overwhelming. Volunteers collect bags of litter, only to find the same areas littered again after a few months. Despite this, many community members persist year after year, driven by a shared commitment to making the city a cleaner, more welcoming place.

Conversations with other local groups reveal that the number of volunteers engaged in litter cleanup is significantly underestimated. Many residents quietly contribute time and effort to maintain public spaces, reflecting a widespread desire to improve the community's appearance and quality of life.

This document offers a comprehensive view of the litter problem in the Tri-Cities—a region projected to grow to 350,000 residents by 2030. Addressing this challenge requires coordination across city, county, and regional levels, alongside improved funding strategies.

With the planned modernization of Washington State's litter tax to include construction debris and motor vehicle debris (public comment deadline: August 8, 2025), this report aims to provide insights from a major urban area to guide the effective use of future resources. The goal is to help Washington become a model state for litter prevention and control.

A key question to consider is how Washington State can leverage its experience and resources to more effectively reduce litter and set a positive example for other regions.



J. Heerink
Sustainable Tri-Cities
Tri-Cities Washington (Kennewick, Richland, West-Richland, Pasco)
August 7, 2025

Current clean up efforts

The **Tri-Cities Litter Map** (Appendix I) highlights current cleanup activities, though it is neither complete nor reflective of event frequency. Some groups clean up multiple times a year; others only once. For example, Ron Fryer of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints shared that his congregation cleans US 395 in Kennewick **four times annually**.

Cities have formal programs as well. Pasco recently reinstated **Adopt-a-Park**, a one-year commitment, though many residents prefer one-time events; only two groups have enrolled so far. Richland supports **13+ active groups**, and Kennewick has around **6 groups** participating yearly.

Beyond these programs, countless “**pop-up**” **crews**—neighbors, faith groups, and individuals—quietly collect trash. Much of this work goes unseen, yet it keeps public spaces looking cared for and masks the true scale of the litter problem.

The Washington State **Community Litter Cleanup Program (CLCP)*** funded by the litter tax contributed to:

- **Franklin County Public Works:** \$141,000 eligible | \$124,674 disbursed (2023 - 2025)
- **Benton County Sheriff Litter & Illegal Dump Cleanup:** \$121,806 eligible | \$78,296 disbursed (2023 - 2025)

The Hidden Paradox

Volunteers often feel like their work is **never-ending**—cleaning the same areas repeatedly, only to see them littered again. On top of that, because much of their effort happens quietly, the public can easily assume there’s “no litter problem” simply because they don’t see the trash.

This creates a **paradox**: the very success of volunteer cleanup can make the issue appear smaller than it really is, reducing pressure for lasting solutions and leaving volunteers feeling their work is both **futile and invisible**.



*The overall goal of the Community Litter Cleanup Program (CLCP) is to assist a county solid waste planning authority or its designated local government agency with the costs of cleaning up litter, illegal dumps, and providing public education and outreach to prevent litter and illegal dumping.

The Tri-Cities litter problem.

Gaps in Statewide Reporting

The 2022 Washington State Litter Study by Cascade Consulting used randomly selected sites, leaving urban areas like the Tri-Cities somewhat underrepresented. While the overall findings remain valid, local insights deserve deeper attention.

Where Litter Accumulates

Consistent with statewide findings, the most common litter sites in the Tri-Cities are: **Roadsides and highway ramps, Parking lots and parks, Roads leading to the Horn Rapids Landfill**, where waste-management traffic contributes to debris, **Road accident sites**, which create episodic but concentrated litter.

Appendix I maps litter patterns in the Tri-Cities, highlighting **persistent “red zones”** where litter is consistently visible, showing inadequate cleaning efforts.

Unique Local Issues

The Tri-Cities faces **environmental and structural factors** that make litter harder to manage:

- **Wind:** The shrub-steppe landscape lacks trees to act as natural barriers. Wind blows litter from roadsides into fences and inaccessible areas like nature preserves and wetlands.
- **Heat & Sun:** Prolonged exposure causes plastics and other materials to deteriorate, fragmenting into small, brittle pieces that are much harder to remove.
- **Recycling Practices:** Kennewick’s curbside program uses open recycling bins, which contribute to scattered materials on windy days.

Litter from Schools

An unexpected observation: **school parking lots** are recurring litter hot spots. Despite the state’s Youth Corps program, schools aren’t setting the best example — Southridge High School and several Richland schools have been noted for consistent debris.

What’s Being Littered

Unlike many national and state reports, **cigarette butts are not the top litter item**. Instead, local reporting — including July 2021 Literati data (Appendix II) — shows **plastics** dominate, particularly in the form of packing foam, wrappers, and large bags. This raises an important methodological question: Quantifying litter by **weight** or **number of items**, can overlook the impact of **large-volume, lightweight materials** like plastic film that occupy significant space, and are visible eye-sores of litter. We could conclude the Cascade Consulting Report’s recommendation based on weight and quantity is misguided.



Reaching a zero litter goal...What works?

Community Volunteer Efforts

Grassroots volunteer cleanup efforts remain a critical and effective pillar in litter reduction. Despite limited funding, community members consistently step up to remove litter, driven by a sense of civic pride and a desire to improve their living environment. Programs like WSDOT's **Adopt-a-Highway** provide valuable support, yet these initiatives would benefit from greater community recognition and enhanced local engagement to maximize impact.

Policy Measures

Since October 2021, Washington State has implemented a plastic bag ban, prohibiting free distribution of single-use plastic bags in grocery stores. Some retailers in the Tri-Cities have adopted this policy fully, offering only paper bags for takeout purchases, while a few still provide plastic bags. Recent bike trail cleanups reflect the policy's effectiveness, with **plastic bags appearing rarely** among littered items. However, banning plastic bags addresses only a fraction of the overall litter challenge, as many other items remain widespread and difficult to regulate.

Enforcement Challenges

In January 2025, Rep. Mark Klicker introduced legislation to raise littering fines, and House Bill 1293 was passed to increase penalties. However, enforcement remains limited. A Kennewick police officer noted that officers **prioritize more serious crimes**, often issuing warnings rather than citations for unsecured loads. Additionally, current reporting systems for litter violations are ineffective for community members (see Appendix III). Consequently, increased fines may not translate into stronger enforcement or deterrence in the Tri-Cities area without additional resources or procedural improvements.

Awareness Campaigns

State campaigns like **"We Keep Washington Litter Free"** and **"Simple As That"** aim to change littering behavior, while **"Secure Your Load"** encourages drivers to properly contain cargo.

In the Tri-Cities, however, these campaigns have **low visibility**. For example, Safeway's free litter bags ran out almost immediately, then were tucked out of sight—limiting public awareness. The effort also raises a valid question: *does handing out yet another disposable plastic item truly align with the goal of reducing waste?*

The most successful campaigns are built on deep insight and rapid testing of concepts, with ongoing measurement of their impact. Continuous iteration helps ensure **resources are focused** and spent on the most effective tools and content.

Best Practices other States*

There are 6 other states that have litter taxes in place: Virginia, New Jersey, Ohio, Tennessee, Nebraska and Hawaii. Results are very difficult to measure and while these states are more transparent with what they fund with it, there is no real direct impact associated with it.

The State of Tennessee may be the one with the most results at least publicized. They reported in 2022 on reducing litter with 12% since 2016.

Tennessee's annual litter report (2024 budget of \$35m), with the following allocation top 5 items:

Contracted litter pickup (interstates & state highways)	\$14.66M
TDOT in-house bulk/litter pickup	\$6.615M
Nobody Trashes Tennessee campaign	\$3.275M
County Litter Grants	\$5.50M
County contracts	\$1.46M
Keep Tennessee Beautiful (UTM)	\$1.64M
Municipal cleanup	\$339.7K
Trustee labor (jail crews)	\$122.7K

Why does Tennessee's model stand out?

- Integrated funding model; Grants flow directly from beverage taxes to counties with clear requirements and accountability
- Behavior-change emphasis: Mandatory education spending, public reporting tools and campaigns like 'Nobody Trashes Tennessee'
- Cost-effective cleanup: Grants leverage county infrastructure, volunteer labor and inmate crews to reduce costs dramatically (~\$14.40/mile)
- Comprehensive coverage: Every county in the state participates, a truly statewide strategy.

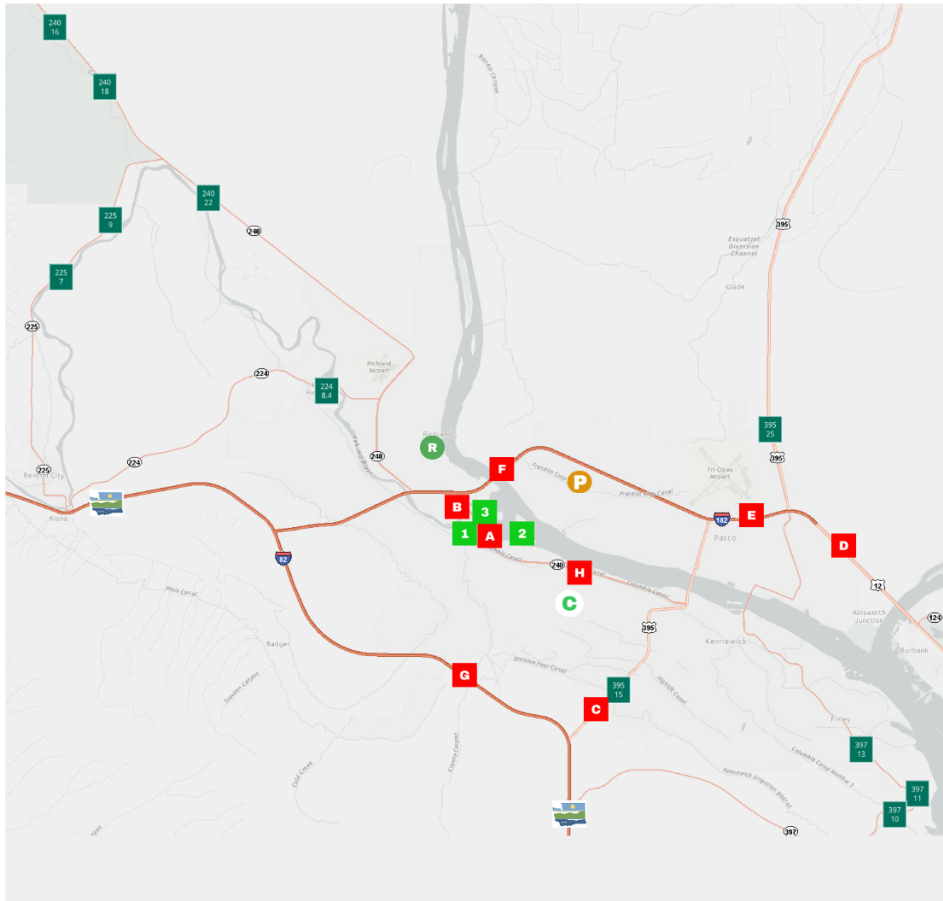
Bend, Oregon

An opinion article in the Tri-City Herald describes the successful 'Adopt-A-Spot' program in Bend, Oregon (see Appendix IV) Participants in Bend commit to maintaining a **specific pocket park, street segment, or public trail**—committing to at least six litter cleanups per year and sometimes beautification tasks like weeding or pollinator planting. The City of Bend provides key support, like supplies & signage, public listings and post-event summaries.

*Content generated with the help of ChatGPT



Appendix I - Tri-Cities Map View



'Adopt a Road Program' Volunteer groups:

Purple Sage Riders, The Havelaarquists, Richland Rotary, Finley Moose Lodge 2681 & Chapter 2394, Knights of Columbus Pasco Council 1620, Fun, Fit & Over Fifty Club, Alleima, Old Studs Bicycle Club, Horn Rapids RV Service & Sales, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Kennewick, Benton City Revitalization Organization

Yearly clean up events: Tapteal Greenway (1,2), Bike Tri-Cities (3)

Chamna Park, Bateman Island, Sacajawea Trail

R Richland Park Service Community cleanups

Various parks on an ongoing basis maintained by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Several churches), American Heritage Girls, HMIS, WRPS, PNNL, CPCCo, Bechtel, Richland Cares Committee, City of Richland (volunteer employees and city council members), Burns & McDonnell, Urban Village, Richland School District Avid Club (Richland and Hanford High Schools) Sealaska Technical Services

C Clean Sweep Tri-Cities

Multiple sites, multiple times per year all around Kennewick/Pasco

K City of Kennewick Park&Rec cleanup volunteer program

Court Ordered Community Service, LDS Church (multiple), Girl Scouts Eastern WA & Northern Idaho Girl Scouts of America, Troop 275 Eagle Scouts, NJROTC, Tri-Cities Disc Golf Club

YouthCorps Dept of Ecology

Crews including Highschool students clean up from Prosser-Tri-Cities-Oregon (I-82), Hanford (Route 240)

P City of Pasco 'Adopt-a-Park' program

A one year cleanup event at Terrace Heights but recently revamped as a year commitment program with one participating group: Amazon

Consistent areas of litter due to lacking cleanup capacity

Sacajawea Trail/Natural Preserve area along I-240 (A), Ramp I-240 and Columbia River Trail, Chamna Park/82 underpass (B), Behind Kennewick Walmart/along 395 (C), Highway 12 +ramps (D,E), Bike trail ramps, underpass 182 (F), Interstate 82 underpass Dallas Rd (G), I-240 in Kennewick.

Appendix II: Article TumbleWeird Fall 2021

Contributor: Jenni H

Plastic is the #1 piece of litter.

The 'Litter free TriCities' Challenge

The results of one month of litter pick up through the Litterati App, are in: 8 participants and 902 pieces of litter, picked up at 8 locations in TriCities are registered in the app. Tada...not a surprise: Plastic is top on the list...

The concerning part of this is that plastic shouldn't be in nature. It harms wildlife and ends up in our water ways and become 'micro-plastics' in our drinking water and the air we breathe. The health effects of micro plastics are still researched, but they carry with them substances which acting as endocrine disruptors could cause long-term effects on human health.

We do know however, that hundred- thousands tons of plastics are already everywhere found all over the world, in our oceans, in places like Antarctica and even human placentas.

So what to do about it?

Well, we can continue to clean up our own backyard, and participate in another available challenge on Litterati: 'American Rivers' National River Cleanup' (Code: NRCCLEANUP). If TriCities would become a partner of Litterati (there are some costs involved) a local report can be created.

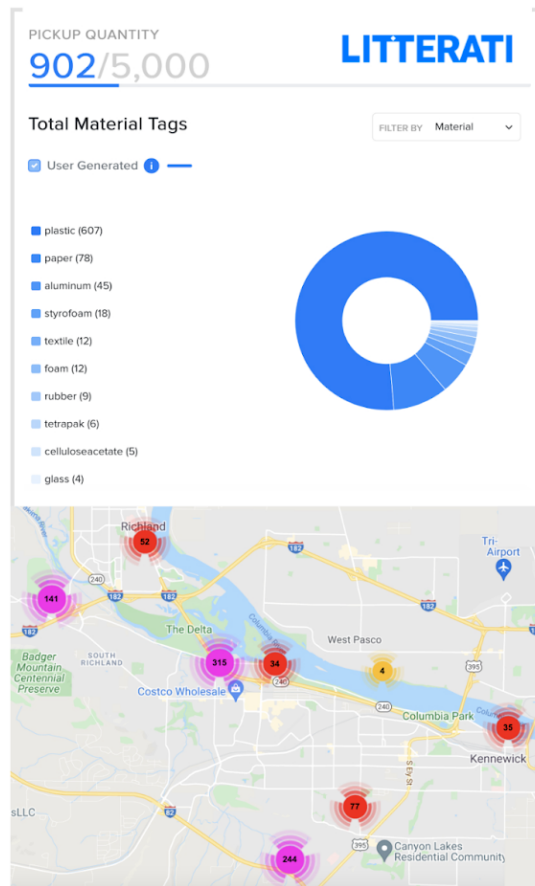
Plastics policies

The ideal solution for the litter is we stop the use of disposable plastics all together. Bring your own bag, bottle, utensils, containers and reuse them. Use packing materials from recycled paper or cardboard and avoid take-out. For a lot of us, this would be a drastic lifestyle change and to be brutally honest, I am sure most people are simply not willing to give up convenience.

The Washington State policy is focused on boosting recycling. In the latest law, a percentage of recycled content will be required for plastic bottles and bags. That may be challenging because so far recycling plastic has been very complicated due to the many versions/types of plastics produced. Keep my fingers crossed! The majority of plastic objects found during the Litterati challenge, are not the typical recyclable objects, for example wrappers, face masks, cups and packaging material. So I am not so optimistic that based on these new laws we: 'recycle our way out of plastic pollution'.

Sources:

Washington State Plastic Laws:
<https://ecology.wa.gov/Waste-Toxics/Reducing-recycling-waste/2021-plastic-pollution-laws>
Plasticenta: First evidence of microplastics in human placenta (January 2021)
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412020322297>



Appendix III - Litter violation chase

Example of unsecured load tracking: the mapped route shows multiple items falling from a trailer over time. The trailer lacked a visible license plate, making it nearly impossible to report the violation. According to Amber Smith (Dept of Ecology) reporting violations 'in-action' by the public is not recommended due to the risk of distracted driving.

Litter violation: unsecured load

Saturday morning Oct 19, 2024



Oct 19
Yesterday, 10:58 AM GMT-07:00

samsung Galaxy A54 5G
f/1.8 1/4608 5.54mm ISO40



Red Pick up truck

East Ainsworth Ave
South Oregon Ave
Pasco, WA



Appendix IV: TriCity Herald Opinion

Letters to the editor



March 23, 2025 | Tri-City Herald (Kennewick, WA)

Page: 2C | Section: Editorial/Opinion

1588 Words | Readability: Lexile: 1200, grade level(s): 10 11-12



Read News Document



Keep our roads cleaned of trash

Local State Rep. Mark Klicker has introduced legislation to increase the base fine for littering. He has said that Washington State has 42% more **litter** than the national average. Years ago, police would cite drivers that refused to cover their loads. Today, it is a rare sight to see any truck cover their load.

We need enforcement for compliance. Washington spends over \$26 million a year to provide teams to pick up trash. Yet, the "Evergreen" state's roadsides look like dumps! There is only one "Adopt A Highway" sign along state Highway 240.

Businesses along that filthy highway should "Adopt" a part to keep it **litter** free for everyone. How can residents, schools and cities promote **litter**-free roads?

Bend, Ore., is pristine, and it has an "Adopt-A-Spot" program that encourages citizens to participate in the beautification of city streets. It's no wonder Bend is desirable. It is committed to staying free of garbage. Tri-Cities needs to show some pride.

Keep a trash bag in your car, throw your trash in a receptacle. Cover your load, Adopt-A-Highway, organize a "Beautification" Project in your neighborhood. Call or email your State representatives to tell them we want Washington to be beautiful again!

Shelley Nielson, Richland

