

Contra Costa Times Your Turn: It is everyone's job to keep litter out of our water

By Bob Simmons

Contra Costa Times Your Turn

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We all want to live and raise our families in a clean and healthy environment. My family and I have lived in this wonderful community for more than 20 years. I love many things about Walnut Creek, but I do not love how much litter there is or what happens to the litter we create.

Litter is trash that is not disposed of properly. The litter we see in the streets, parking lots, parks and sometimes our open space areas is traveling through our community and will ultimately reach our creeks. While we might not always see the litter in our creeks, it is definitely there.

Many communities and citizens in Contra Costa County support creek cleanup days to deal with litter. During the annual Creek Cleanup Day in Walnut Creek in May, more than 100 volunteers removed more than 40 cubic yards of debris from the small portion of Walnut, San Ramon and Las Trampas creeks that forms our downtown creeks.

This is equivalent to 60 trash bins of garbage, and from a very small area. Had the volunteers not removed all this litter, it would have continued its journey to Suisun Bay and to the ocean. According to a recent study, 9 percent of ocean fish have plastic in their stomachs.

From participating in last year's creek cleanup, I know that the most common pieces of litter are individually wrapped or packaged snacks or liquid containers, plastic bags and takeout food containers. Cigarette butts are also a major source of litter. What can you do to help keep our local waterways litter-free?

The first thing is to reduce the amount of trash by doing the following:

- When shopping -- and not just at the grocery store -- take your own bags, and reuse them.
- Whether going to work or school, or going on a hike, pack your food in a reusable container rather than in a single-use plastic bag.

- When taking snacks and drinks to a child's sports game, take drinks in large containers and homemade snacks rather than using individually packaged drinks and snacks.

Next, to reduce the amount of trash that becomes litter, you can do the following:

- Use the nearest trash can or, better yet, take the trash home and dispose of it there. This reduces the likelihood that the trash will overflow the receptacle, which would result in more litter.
- Whether going on a family outing or attending a child's sports game, remove all the trash you create and, better yet, remove all the trash you can see.
- Find ways to reuse trash rather than dispose of it. For example, large plastic bottles can be used in the garden to extend the growing season.
- Finally, participate in creek cleanup days and in beach cleanup days. This is the last point of defense against litter entering our waterways, but it is an important step.

These steps will require more time to prepare for activities and to clean up afterward, but these are essential steps if we are to have a clean and healthy environment now and in the future.

The Contra Costa Clean Water Program supports these and other efforts to reduce the amount of litter that enters our waterways. Valuable information about how to keep litter from our waterways can be found at www.cccleanwater.org.

The website also has many helpful suggestions and ways to keep our local creeks and streams litter-free.

Please join me in supporting the Contra Costa Clean Water Program's efforts to reduce the amount of litter in our world and to keep our local waterways litter-free.

Bob Simmons is the mayor of Walnut Creek.