

Transcript For *Curious Nashville*: “The Do’s And Don’ts Of Nashville Recycling”

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Tony Gonzalez: Plastic straws, old light bulbs, shredded paper — can they be recycled?

Your questions about recycling just keep coming.

I'm Tony Gonzalez and this is *Curious Nashville*, where WPLN reporters chase down the answers for you. So we've taken a dive into the recycling bin before, but by popular demand we have a fresh batch of insights. Plus, some news to report about changes to recycling in Nashville. And we're going to hear from two experts.

But we're going to start with a little flashback. Emily Siner is here.

Emily Siner: Hello.

Tony: Hey. So, Emily, can you just remind us what spurred you to study recycling in the first place back in 2017?

Emily: Yeah. So a guy named Mark McCaw asked us a seemingly innocuous question — what happens when you put the wrong thing in the recycling bin? — which I really love because I feel like a lot of people have this question when they're standing at a bin and they're kind of trying to decide, “Do I put this in recycling or in trash?” Like, “What do I do? What's going to happen?”

And the question took me on this journey throughout the recycling process. I got to shadow a recycling pickup truck driver, and just followed the process from there. And my personal favorite part was when I went to the recycling sorting facility in Nashville which is where the recycling trucks drop off all their stuff, and it just is basically a huge mountain of trash — except it's not trash, it's recycling. Everything that you would throw in your recycling bin like cans and milk jugs and boxes and also some things that are definitely not supposed to be there.

The site manager that I talked to was Paul Farley, and he kept pointing to some of those things that are not supposed to be there.

Paul Farley: You see that light cream color with all the slotted holes? That's siding off a house.

Emily: So that's getting thrown out?

Paul: That stuff we can't do anything with.

Emily: So I got to learn why you can't recycle some of these things, and why it's very important to only recycle the things that are supposed to be. And I felt empowered by the end; I felt like I understood how it worked. And the two people who really helped me understand this during the reporting process were Kelly Tipler with Metro Public Works

and Leah Sherry with Turnip Green Creative Reuse. So, they're here today. Hello!

Leah Sherry: Hello.

Kelly Tipler: Hey.

Tony: So, Leah's organization is Turnip Green. It's a nonprofit that diverts waste from the landfill. So what they do is they take donations of materials like papers, fabrics, office supplies, and they sell them back to artists and teachers. They also run classes and have an art gallery.

Kelly founded Turnip Green but is now in the beautification division with Metro. So she works on composting, recycling, litter pickup and tree planting across the city. Together they are a perfect team to answer questions.

Chapter 1: Lightning-Round Questions

[00:02:47] So we're going to jump right into what we're calling our lightning round of recycling questions. These were all asked by *Curious Nashville* listeners.

Tony: First question: Can the bag inside a boxed wine be recycled in the curbside pickup, if the spout is removed?

Kelly: No.

Tony: Well that isn't easy.

Kelly: I can tell you where to recycle it. If it's clean, it can go in with other plastic film and plastic bags to big-box stores or grocery stores.

Emily: So this is from Anna. What should you do with the caps on many glass containers — plastic or metal caps?

Kelly: [00:03:15] They can go into the recycling. If you can find a plastic bottle for the plastic cap to fit, that is best because it will most likely make it through the recycling process. It's hard; caps are small. So are straws, and sometimes they get lost in the process.

Tony: We are not stumping anyone yet. We'll try to get some trickier ones here. So, let's see. I'm looking at one. Rachel asks, "How do I recycle shredded paper?"

Leah: Just put it in an envelope, and it'll be fine.

Kelly: Or if it's a large amount like some offices have large amounts and they still have a curbside bin, they can put it in a paper bag.

Tony: Great, awesome.

Emily: This is similar to the shredded paper question. Is there a way you could collect small plastic, like straws or lids, into one container and recycle it?

Leah: Milk jug!

Emily: Oh, yeah!

Tony: I want to stick on plastics for just a minute, and straws in particular. I just know everybody is talking about straws these days. Are straws difficult or not? Or should we just recycle them if we have them?

Kelly: Straws are definitely recyclable. However, they easily are lost in our recycling system. So it's better if you have — I've heard Leah mention this a million times, and it's a great suggestion — if you have like a plastic cup from a fast-food place or something like that, push your straw inside of it and then recycle it.

Leah: Make sure it's empty first, though.

Emily: This is from Francis, also on plastics. So we know that plastics 1 through 7 can be recycled, but what about the plastics that don't have a symbol on it?

Kelly: From the recycling plant: Stick to the numbers.

Tony: All right. Next lightning-round question: Can unworkable computer keyboards be recycled?

Kelly: Better to be reused.

Leah: Yeah, Turnip Green loves those. Artists make all kinds of cool things out of keyboards and the keys.

Emily: This is from Matt, on kind of a similar note: Where can light bulbs be recycled?

Leah: We take them at Turnip Green. But there's a few other box stores like Home Depot or Lowe's that take them as well.

Tony: Next lightning-round question comes from Tammy. She asks, "Where can I recycle clean hay bale twine?"

Leah: You know what? Turnip Green loves the hale bale twine because it comes in beautiful colors.

Kelly: It's true.

Leah: Yeah.

Kelly: And there isn't a good place to recycle it through Metro. It's plastic, typically it is recyclable — it's not recyclable in our system.

Leah: It would actually — that's a good example of something that would harm the machines at the recycling center because the string would get wound around the revolving machines and jam 'em up.

Kelly: Yup.

Emily: From Sarah who has a sort of logistical question. She says, “When we bought our house, the recycle bin was missing its lid. Can I get a new top for my recycle bin?”

Kelly: Yes, you absolutely can. We will repair carts at no cost, so she can go onto the [hubNashville](#), and you can make all of those requests on there.

Emily: Last lightning-round question. Very specific: Can envelopes with self-adhesive flaps and clear plastic windows be recycled?

Kelly and Leah: Yes.

Emily: In unison. Excellent. I have a follow-up stationary question. What about greeting cards that, like, you know they tend to be pretty ink-heavy on the front?

Kelly: Yeah. Ink's good, glitter's bad.

Emily: Oh, OK.

Kelly: If it's metallic, if it's glitter or if it's flocked, it's not OK.

Leah: I know a place that takes it!

Emily: Yes!

Tony: So for our lightning round, we asked maybe a dozen questions. We did not manage to stump you guys.

Leah: What do we win?

Emily: Just the glory of being recycling experts.

Tony: The empowerment of the masses to carry out their recycling.

Emily: That's true, that's very important.

Kelly: That's good. We'll take that.

Leah: We'll take it.

Tony: It'd probably be easy to do lightning-round questions forever — I'd ask about every little can, every bottle, this, that, every product with a coating on it. But it might also be helpful since we can't list everything out there to develop some broader lessons or takeaways about recycling. So after a break, Emily, Leah and Kelly are going to share their advice for the recycling rules of thumb.

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Chapter 2: Recycling's Rules of Thumb

Tony: [00:08:48] The rules of recycling can boil down to a few key ideas. This is something that Emily learned as she was doing her reporting a couple years ago.

Emily: Yeah. So when I was doing the story, I sort of started by asking similar kinds of questions, like, "Can you do this? Can you do this? I've always wondered." And the thing that I kept getting back from people in the recycling field was sort of like these broader rules of thumb which I think are actually quite useful. And I guess actually the rule above them all is reduce or reuse first.

Leah: So it's a lot about being a smart shopper and starting at the first step rather than ending up with the material and saying, "What do I do with it now?" Like how do you address that issue from the very beginning?

Kelly: Just from kind of a larger perspective — from a landfill perspective — you know, straws and the things that we hear bans about: straws and plastic bags — the truth is they don't take up very much space in the landfill. But what they do cause is a horrendous litter problem. So if we can take care of them or refuse them, the bags and the straws, it's really more about a greener and cleaner and more beautiful environment, even more than recycling.

Kelly: You know, Paul, that we worked with it at Waste Management, he always says, "Instead of focusing on what you can't, focus on what you can." And there's very broad categories that I would say are your rule of thumb, and that's gonna be:

- Your plastic containers: containers being the key piece of that. If you're just trying to make sure you're hitting all the right things, then plastic containers 1 through 7.
- Your metal cans, so anything that's got — even your aerosol cans are good.
- Any cardboard is OK. And then any paper products.

Kelly: There are a few that are a little weird, but in general your paper products, and if you're doing all of that in your household you are mostly recycling right and well.

Leah: Can I add one thing to that, that I've noticed is a lot of times when we do focus on what we can't. I've noticed that people are almost getting encouraged to quit recycling things that can be recycled. And so while I know that the intent is good, I've seen that have negative effects. So I trust people like Kelly and Paul who have been in the industry for a long time. I think that's really wise advice.

Emily: That's good. I like that.

Tony: Could you recap where we've gotten so far with the rules of thumb and then press on to the next one?

Emily: So, No. 1: Refuse or reduce or reuse, and consider what you can recycle, not just what you can't.

Kelly: Yep.

Tony: And then, Emily, you have a third rule, and this one is a little different.

Emily: The definition of recycling is not just what you can throw in your bin. It's just anywhere that you can turn your materials into something else. And so there are lots of places to recycle all sorts of things that you can't put in your Metro bin. So, for example, Styrofoam. There is a place in Nashville that recycles Styrofoam, right?

Kelly: There's a place in La Verne.

Emily: OK. Plastic bags — that's a big one that can't go in the recycling bin because it jams up the machines, but lots of grocery stores take plastic bags, and —

Leah: Yeah, most likely where you got the plastic bag from, it I'll take it back.

Emily: What are the other big things that you get questions about: "Where can I recycle this?"

Kelly: We get mattresses, you know, really large things, carpet padding; we take those at the convenient centers in Nashville.

Leah: Electronics. [Which are accepted at] convenience centers, too.

Emily: Because it's kind of like the question of, like, "Can I recycle X?" It's like, "Yeah, you probably can."

Kelly: Yes. Most things are recyclable. It's just: Do they fit into our system?

Chapter 3: Nashville Recycling Updates

Tony: [00:12:31] We promised earlier on that we were going to have some news, maybe not breaking news, but some news or updates about recycling in Nashville. First off, we had done a little bit of reporting about glass recycling in downtown Nashville. Before we dive totally into that, though: Kelly, can you just talk a little bit about the challenges or the goods or bads of glass recycling as it has been in Nashville?

Kelly: Sure. Glass recycling is really hard to do at the curb. It's very costly. It's heavy, and it also isn't as toxic in the landfill as some things such as food waste. So glass is only accepted now at the convenience centers and drop-off points for residents. We did see a potential outlet for glass in bulk downtown with the honky tonks, and so we explored that and did a pilot program there. That pilot program ran for several months, and unfortunately just as it's hard for us to recycle it, it was hard for the honky tonks to actually separate the material and as it would be at the residents' homes. And so that participation dropped off while we had hoped it would be a smashing success. It wasn't. And so we actually are discontinuing that program.

Emily: Well, so, the second news item we get a lot of questions about: Why isn't there more frequent recycling in Nashville? There's currently once-a-month recycling pickup if you live in the urban services district. But for some people, that is not enough, or if you're like me and you forget to bring your recycling bin out on the right day, then it's definitely not enough. So what's going on with the frequency of recycling?

Kelly: Very exciting. Every year, Public Works has asked for increased recycling, so it's something that we've wanted for a long time, it's something that's been on our minds and unfortunately hasn't been in the budget. And this year, Mayor Briley has made it a pretty big priority and has asked that we look at that further. So we are working with partners at the state level and also other funding partners that can provide grant opportunities for us so we can kind of scrape up some of that funding and the city can help as well come together with those different pots of funding. And so we are now looking at every other week recycling in early 2020.

Tony: And Kelly, would that be for all of the counties, certain areas ...

Kelly: It will be just in the urban services district at this point. However, we've been working on a 30-year solid waste master plan, and it's in the master plan to start incorporating some of the general service district areas as well. We don't have a timeline; we don't even have a finalized plan yet. But those those are considerations that have been made.

Tony: Well, Kelly and Leah, we so appreciate you guys coming back to answer even more recycling questions. Thank you to both of you for coming to answer these questions.

Kelly: Thank you.

Leah: Thank you for having us.

Episode Credits

Tony: [00:15:44] *Curious Nashville* is a project of Nashville Public Radio. I'm Tony Gonzalez, the executive producer. Editing came from Emily Siner and Anita Bugg. Audio mastering by Carl Peterson. Our web stories are dramatically enhanced by Mack Linebaugh, and our theme music is by Podington Bear. You can see all of the stories that you've inspired and ask new questions by visiting curious.wpln.org. Thanks for listening.