



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

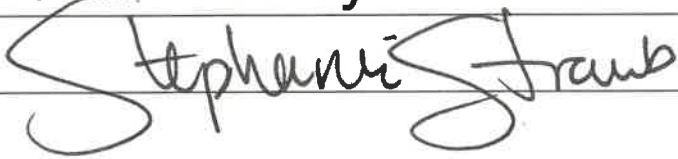
### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Orange County  
Program Title: Plastic Film Recycling  
Program Category: Environmental

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephanie Straub  
Title: Assistant County Administrator  
Signature: 

## **2024 VACo Achievement Award Nomination**

### **Category: Environmental**

### **Nominee: Plastic Film Recycling**

#### **Executive Summary:**

Citizens are often ready and willing to recycle waste rather than add it to landfill facilities. Obstacles to recycling usually stem from a lack of convenient avenues or a commodity's low recycle value rather than apathy. Orange County makes a strong effort to provide accessible, practical, and meaningful recycling opportunities to our residents. Examples include provision of five distinct single-stream recycling locations throughout the county, hosting of annual electronics recycling events, and more recently, the creation of recycling programs for traditionally difficult-to-recycle items such as plastic film.

Plastic film is pervasive. Grocery bags, bubble wrap, pallet wrap, produce and bread bags, and shipping envelopes are all examples of plastic films that residents regularly interact with. That being the case, there was a strong desire to properly dispose of the film. Unfortunately, it could not be accepted in our single-stream recycling containers. Visits to our primary recycling vendor's facility made clear how plastic film would "gum up the works" of their sorting and processing equipment.

A solution was found by participating in the NexTrex Recycling Challenge program. Enrolling in this program gave us the disposal avenue we had been lacking. With that in place, effective communication and convenient placement have driven a turnout so successful that we have to stagger deliveries of the plastic film collected at our facilities! We received our first composite bench from the program last fall and are ready to take delivery of another.

## **Main Nomination:**

Solid waste disposal in Orange County strives to provide convenient and effective options for our residents to dispose of their refuse in a way that is safe, affordable, and environmentally responsible. Collection and recycling sites are dispersed throughout the county to ensure that very few residents experience more than a 15-minute drive to get rid of their household trash. Despite rising industry challenges, Orange County still offers single-stream recycling options for most recyclables. Further demonstrating convenience, hours of operation for most collection sites include Sunday options and weekday hours extend to 7:00 p.m. to allow residents to make the trip after work. Partnerships with local organizations and our Litter Control Committee help provide regular special events such as tire amnesty, hazardous waste disposal, e-recycling, and community shredding. Despite our diligent efforts to eliminate barriers to responsible solid waste disposal, we still faced certain challenges that afflict many localities. One of those was a convenient way for residents to recycle plastic film.

Single-stream recycling is a significant convenience for residents that contributes to greater recycling than is usually found when requiring commodity separation. However, the equipment and processing required to make single-stream recycling practical are ill-suited to handling plastic films. Orange County staff visited the sorting facility utilized by our vendor to witness firsthand the reasons for this limitation. Not willing to sacrifice the benefits of single-stream recycling to accommodate plastic film capability, but still recognizing the importance of diverting these products from our landfill (or worse, the environment), the Orange County Litter Control Committee took action to find an

alternative option in the spring of 2023. The NexTrex Recycling Challenge program provided the perfect opportunity.

NexTrex is an initiative of Trex Company, Inc., a producer of outdoor living products best known for composite decking. Trex is based in Winchester, VA. The regional nature of this partnership made it even easier for us to participate, and the firm's well-recognized name helped provide confidence to those interested in participating. As participants in the NexTrex Recycling Challenge program, communities can collect plastic film in a variety of forms, including grocery bags, bread and produce bags, bubble wrap, shipping envelopes, re-closable food storage bags, case overwrap (of the sort used to hold groups of individual water bottles together), pallet wrap, and more! For every 1,000 pounds of plastics collected, that community becomes eligible to receive a high-quality composite Trex bench. The collected films are given new life as composite decking products and are kept out of the landfill and environment.

Finding a practical solution was the first hurdle; the next was implementing it in Orange County in a way that maintained convenience for our residents. With that in mind, Orange County Litter Control worked with the Public Works Department to locate several plastic film drop-off bins in county offices. Six



*Figure 1: The first composite bench received by Orange County welcomes Animal Shelter visitors!*



*Figure 2: Bins were conveniently located at several Orange County facilities.*

locations were chosen due to their ability to provide coverage across Orange County and the significant amount of foot traffic they regularly received. Locations included the main Orange County administrative building, each of our library buildings, the Landfill's office



*Figure 3: Each bin was filled with an affordable drum liner that was also recyclable within the program.*

building, and the Parks & Recreation/Public Works office. Providing options at the libraries and landfill office created the additional benefit of Saturday availability, which further removed obstacles to participation. Attractive, well-marked bins made it easy for residents to find the drop-off location and confirm the acceptable items.

Along with convenience, promotion and awareness efforts to encourage buy-in from the community were essential to making this project a success. Orange County Litter Control worked with the Communications Department to help spread the word across our website, social media platforms (including video instructions), and the Orange County Insight newsletter. Flyers located across county buildings provided additional confirmation and reference for both visitors and staff members.

Partnerships with local organizations and businesses expanded the reach of our program and helped it excel. Food Lion was already a partner with NexTrex, and the Food Lion grocery store in Orange serves as the initial collection point where our bags of plastic film are officially weighed and held until pickup by Trex. Working with them removed one of the initial obstacles, which was midpoint storage of the collected plastics. In terms of collection partners, the Love Outreach Food Pantry was (and is) one of the most significant. Due to their nature as a food bank, the Pantry couldn't help but accumulate plastic film from the removal of food product packaging at their facility. Instead of being

discarded with regular trash, that plastic was diverted into our recycling program. Even better, patrons of the pantry could easily participate by bringing their plastics. The result was a positive feedback loop allowing those utilizing the food bank to return any eligible plastics from their previous pickup upon their return. Another important contributor was Sedwick Building Supply, a local business that offers lumber, hardware, tools, and more. Many of their products are delivered by pallet, often with plastic overwrap. The collection of that plastic was another significant driver towards the success of the program.

Thanks to the great turnout at government buildings and effective partnerships with local organizations, the response far exceeded staff expectations! The Litter Control Committee Coordinator visited each location regularly (or when called by the location), gathered the collected plastic, and prepared the bin to accept more. Orange County joined the program in the middle of



*Figure 4: Most liners weighed about 11 pounds when full.*

a year, and with that in mind the milestone for our first bench was prorated to 500 pounds in six months. It's worth noting that achieving that goal still required the same rate of collection as the usual 1,000 pounds in a year. While impressive offhand, it is even more remarkable when put into perspective. According to Trex, Orange County collected the equivalent of approximately 40,500 bags during the first collection cycle! To further illustrate the amount of plastic collected, each bin was equipped with a large drum liner (itself recyclable in the program) to allow for swift and effective collection. When full, those bags averaged around 11 pounds. To achieve the 500-pound milestone means that we successfully collected at least 45 large drum liners filled to the brim with plastic film. Removing that many plastic film products from potential inclusion in our landfill or from

becoming litter in the environment continues to motivate our staff and participants. Owing to the strong participation of our employees and residents, we readily qualified for our first composite bench in September and took delivery at the Orange County Animal Shelter in November.

The Communications Department helped leverage this success by creating a [press release](#) concurrent with America Recycles Day, as well as an [article](#) in our popular newsletter. Local news agencies picked up the story, and the resulting increase in awareness has helped the program accelerate like a snowball rolling downhill.



Figure 5: The Orange County Insight newsletter is a well-read publication of our organization. The November 2023 issue highlighted the plastic film recycling program collecting enough plastic to receive a composite bench from Trex!

In fact, we have now begun to collect so much plastic film that we often have to stagger deliveries to the initial collection point to avoid overwhelming their capacity! As of this submission, we have already collected enough to meet the next goal and take delivery of our second bench, which will represent an additional 1,000 pounds collected. The success of this program illustrates the desire of our residents to dispose of their waste in an environmentally friendly way if given a viable option. Furthermore, it is representative of the diligent effort made by our solid waste collection staff and Litter Control Committee participants to find new solutions and provide convenient, accessible disposal avenues for our residents.