

Combating litter: Accelerating the learning curve for the young

By Rick Maier

The young man driving the car in front of you rolls down his window and tosses a fast food bag onto the street. What is he thinking? A young woman throws a cigarette wrapper in the bushes along a sidewalk. What do you do?

I classify people who litter into two groups – those who know better but don't care, and young people who have not yet developed that sense of caring about their community that comes with maturity and adult-level responsibilities.

Whatever happened to the youth-driven ecology movement? Kids and teenagers probably litter because they figure someone will pick up after them or that one more piece of trash won't matter.

Their parents teach them about respecting the property of others, but it hasn't 'sunk in'. So one way to reduce litter would be to accelerate the learning curve for young people.

Littering may not be a serious crime, but it becomes a big public problem when so many people throw debris where it doesn't belong. "Forty eight percent of Americans admit to having littered at one time or another in the past 10 years," according to a survey by Keep America Beautiful last year. In a separate poll, one out of three youths aged 8-14 said they litter or don't care if others do.

We may not all share the same definition of littering. I personally don't have a problem throwing a toothpick into a bed of pine straw, or an apple core into the woods, but I expect that an environmentalist would disagree. One thing's for certain, none of us have 450 years to wait for a plastic bottle to biodegrade.

Most littering is inadvertent – trash blowing out of dumpsters or from construction sites. Inadvertent, but preventable. Litter perpetuates itself - people are more likely to litter where trash already exists.

Clean roads and parks are one of many criteria used by tourists and prospective employers to measure the quality of a community. Visitors can find plenty of streets around Macon where people seldom litter, and if they do, residents pick it up. They could also find areas where an abundance of litter and dumping indicates distress.

Efforts to reduce litter

The Keep Macon-Bibb Beautiful Commission coordinates an impressive number of local anti-littering initiatives. Carolyn Crayton and her team work on education and prevention

with school programs such as “Auntie Litter” and “There’s No Such Thing as Away”. KMBBC organizes community cleanups by providing bags and vests to volunteers, encourages beautification projects, recognizes standout citizens, and campaigns against lawbreakers such as the knothead who hang signs on telephone poles.

Meanwhile, the public works departments of both Macon and Bibb County spend hundreds of thousands of our tax dollars on keeping the streets clean (the prisoners work for free or it would cost a lot more).

The police arrest some violators, but one officer told me that they only have the resources to focus on major violators, such as those who dump illegally. The last littering ticket he wrote was for a driver who pitched a beer can out of his window and hit the patrol car.

Here’s an idea to encourage young people to contribute, and make them more sensitive to clean streets. All sixteen-year-olds should spend 16 hours (four Saturday mornings) on litter patrol before they get their driver’s license. Volunteer leaders and government issued equipment could assure that the kids learn a valuable lesson in an enjoyable and safe way.

KMBBC, Bibb County and the City of Macon do a great job, but they can’t do it alone. We all need to pitch in to keep our streets clean. Don’t put loose trash in the back of a pickup. Keep a litter bag in your car. Shame those who litter by picking up after them - maybe they’ll see you do it.

Most important, let’s pick up after ourselves. Be a role model for a young person. We have a beautiful community that deserves our respect.

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