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State of Sustainability and Resilience in Georgetown A Small Business Perspective

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State of Sustainability and Resilience in Georgetown

A Small Business Perspective

Introduction & Thesis

In Georgetown County, South Carolina, revenue from tourists flocking to the area during the summer and holiday season generates a majority of employment opportunity and income for the county¹. With that, comes the unfortunate high rates of pollution to this water-shed centered community through outdated waste management practices and policies that are at carrying capacity, especially during a global pandemic. Even though Georgetown County is a majority rural and agricultural focused county, small businesses make up the largest percentage of businesses and retail is the third largest industry². Knowing this, I will be examining and analyzing Georgetown County's waste management abilities and accessibility through the lens of a small business, Island Specialties, and my experiences working there. In this report, I will be focusing on how difficult it is to be a sustainable business in Georgetown County, not just through services and products offered but through analyzing how customer base impacts business' eco-friendly focus, as well as how policies in the local community can either hinder or encourage businesses to be more sustainable.

This is related to goals #11, #12, and #13 in the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Goal #11 is concerned with sustainability in communities, and I will be focusing particularly on

¹ (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

² (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

target 11.6: “By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management”³. Waste management in a community is an important base layer towards improved living quality, a clean environment to play, live, and grow in, as well as better outside perception of aesthetics from tourists, which wraps around to increased revenue in the local economy. Climate action is goal #13, and I will be touching upon targets 13.2: “Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning”, and 13.3: “Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.”⁴ Through communicating my recommended policies my goal is to bring changes to improve Georgetown County.

My main focal point will be on Goal #12, which focuses on a responsible production and consumption line. Target 12.5: “By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse”, 12.6: “Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle”, and 12.8: “By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature”, will be main points of what Island Specialties is doing in the community to be a sustainable leader in business. Whereas target 12.b: “Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products”, and 12.c: “Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, ... including by restructuring taxation and phasing

³ “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development,” United Nations (United Nations, n.d.)

⁴ “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development,” United Nations (United Nations, n.d.)

out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts...”⁵ These are things that I have observed that need to be improved in Pawleys Island through local policies.

As a small business with growing sustainability initiatives, Island Specialties is educating customers towards an eco-friendlier lifestyle through social media and the products they offer. Additionally, Island Specialties is starting a reusable bag program, that partners with other local businesses in the area. This program, fondly nicknamed ‘Sea Worthy Reusable Bags’, is expected to educate the community about reuse, saying no to unnecessary plastic packaging including plastic bags, and cross-market many local businesses in Pawleys Island to increase traffic to those stores. There will be 300 cotton tote bags in circulation this summer, with nine total local businesses participating to sell the bags, Island Specialties included, that are committed to informing customers about the harmful impacts of plastic in our local environment and incentivizing reuse over single use. This is an example of how goal #11 can be implemented in an area. By ensuring that Island Specialties continues to sell products from companies that are sustainably focused, the store is aiming to bring customers in who have a passion for eco-friendliness.

However, it is not easy to be a leader in sustainability as a small business. I have noticed the amount of plastic packaging Island Specialties gets sent from vendors, even the most environmentally friendly ones, is shocking. The store needs solutions to recycle the waste it produces so that it does not end up in local landfills, but the low accessibility in Georgetown makes that difficult. However, by ensuring that every level or income of business is represented at the decision-making level, Georgetown County can ensure that they are staying on a

⁵ “THE 17 GOALS | Sustainable Development,” United Nations (United Nations, n.d.)

sustainable-focused path to keep their water-shed community as clean and environmentally healthy as possible.

Observations

While considering the local goals for Georgetown as outlined in the 2011 City of Georgetown Comprehensive Plan, I identified that there are no goals explicitly set for minimizing pollution in the county. However, there are a few that could relate to minimizing pollution. “Protect and enhance the quality of surface water and groundwater resources within the Georgetown area”, “Make every effort to protect the invaluable wetland resources in the Georgetown area”, and “Facilitate public education and outreach initiatives to increase awareness of important environmental issues and encourage stewardship of Georgetown’s invaluable natural resources.”⁶ Although these are important goals, none of them specifically state fighting against pollution. Engaging against pollution at the local government level would not only make the county aesthetically more pleasing, but I believe it would also increase perception of the county by tourists, improve resident’s living quality and satisfaction, as well as fulfill a part of all the local environmental goals for the county by alleviating trash from becoming a major hinderance towards accomplishing those goals.

The small businesses of Georgetown County hold up the local economy. They supply over 10,000 jobs, make up 75-80% of businesses, and bring in plenty of revenue to the area⁷. However, two of the top three industries in the county are tourist dependent⁸, which means they must have policies in place to meet CDC guidelines against COVID-19. But with these sanitary measures comes more plastic waste generated, which the county just cannot handle and recycle

⁶ *City of Georgetown Comprehensive Plan* (City of Georgetown, November 8, 2011)

⁷ (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

⁸ (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

properly with their current abilities. Georgetown county does not provide commercial plastic recycling to its businesses⁹, only a free paper and cardboard pick-up service. Goal #12 can be one step closer to reaching if Georgetown County focused their policies to better accommodate smaller, struggling businesses that cannot afford an outside pick-up service and must turn to the county's free option. The COVID-19 global pandemic has put a strain on prices of more eco-friendly packaging options versus the cheapest: plastic¹⁰. Therefore, more businesses are going towards purchasing single-use plastics and packaging for their products. If Georgetown County can reform the way that these businesses think about plastic, use plastic, and deal with plastic waste, then their communities will follow. I expect this would create a domino effect in the county, decreasing business turnover rate in the county, increasing the reputation of the county, which can therefore help to boost the economy through tourism and improved quality of life for citizens.

Georgetown county is on the right path towards improved sustainability, but there needs to be changes implemented to reach any UN Sustainable Development Goals. The Chirping Bird Society and Keep Georgetown Beautiful are great volunteer opportunities and initiatives to educate the community of the harmful impacts of plastic, while bringing the community together. The free commercial cardboard and paper pick-up service that the county offers do wonders to take waste off business' premises, so they do not have to put in time or money to do so themselves. Even encouraging recycling and having the necessary information available readily for the public is a step on the right path for any county in the nation. But there are so

⁹ "Recycling Georgetown County South Carolina Government," Recycling Georgetown County South Carolina Government (Environmental Services , n.d.)

¹⁰ Dave Ford, "COVID-19 Has Worsened the Ocean Plastic Pollution Problem," Scientific American (Scientific American, August 17, 2020)

many things that Georgetown County does to unintentionally impede businesses' sustainability efforts that it is hard to recognize all the hard work that has been put in already.

There are numerous things that Georgetown County has implemented that hinder businesses from reaching sustainability goals. The first, is not offering a free plastic recycling pick-up service for businesses. Plastic packaging sent to stores is the biggest contributor to the plastic environmental crisis, with 141 million tons generated in 2015¹¹. I have previously mentioned that a lot of small businesses may not be able to afford a waste pick-up service due to how COVID-19 has strained financial decisions for businesses this past year. This means if a business does have the time and/or money to take their plastic, glass, or aluminum to the recycling center themselves, then some stores will have no other option than to include it with their waste so it can be picked up for free. Businesses could also be fined upwards of \$45 per ton if there is trash mixed in with the recyclables and if they are not sorted out into their respective categories¹². But there is no definition of what this "trash" specifically means anywhere on the Environmental Services website. Does this trash include label stickers on plastic packaging? What would deem a recyclable, "unrecyclable", other than being dirty from food? These a few of the questions that need to be brought to the attention of businesses in the county to help clear confusion.

Literature & Case Studies

To learn how businesses in Georgetown can implement eco-friendly practices and sustainable policies, one must look elsewhere for inspiration first. In Germany, for example, they

¹¹ Hannah Ritchie, "FAQs on Plastics," Our World in Data, September 2, 2018

¹² "Recycling Georgetown County South Carolina Government," Recycling Georgetown County South Carolina Government (Environmental Services, n.d.), <http://www.georgetowncountysc.org/recycling/>.

have implemented a deposit-refund system surrounding plastic beverage bottles that improves waste incentive collection by the consumer. This deposit-refund system works in the way that the consumer bringing the plastic item to a collection area gets a certain monetary amount back for doing so. However, the consumer essentially pays themselves in the form of a small fee when they purchase the plastic beverage bottle, which they will get back when they deposit it¹³. A scientific article published 2020 found that, “In the countries/regions that implement the beverage packaging deposit-refund system, more than 50% of the beverage packaging recovery rate has been achieved, and the recovery rate is even more than 90%”¹⁴. If something like this were implemented in Georgetown, this would work to not only improve the issue of litter in the county, but also incentivize appreciation for the local environment through a reward system.

Another important aspect that I will be analyzing centers around consumer’s dependence on single use plastics as a form of base-line sanitation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. There are moral challenges around having to use plastic covered PPE, disposable masks, and single-use plastic food waste when there is a huge environmental crisis against plastic. Some consumers are now instinctually scared of any reusable item as they believe it cannot ever get “clean” again, even if they are washed at a high temperature in the dishwasher or washing machine¹⁵. On one hand, plastic must be used for certain fields, like medical use. But unnecessary plastic packaging is having a lasting impression on our ecosystem¹⁶.

¹³ Plastic Smart Cities, “DEPOSIT REFUND SCHEME,” Plastic Smart Cities, n.d.

¹⁴ Guangli Zhou et al., “A Systematic Review of the Deposit-Refund System for Beverage Packaging: Operating Mode, Key Parameter and Development Trend,” *Journal of Cleaner Production* (Elsevier, April 1, 2020)

¹⁵ Kumar Raja Vanapalli et al., “Challenges and Strategies for Effective Plastic Waste Management during and Post COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Science of The Total Environment* (Elsevier, August 4, 2020)

¹⁶ Puneet Kollipara, “Plastic Bags Cut Wildlife Populations in Marshland Ecosystems,” *C&EN*, April 14, 2015

At Island Specialties, almost every item came individually wrapped in plastic film, which was then all packaged in bubble wrap or packing peanuts. We tried to reuse as much plastic bags as we could, but ultimately, we had to throw some away as it was overwhelming our free space. This scientific journal can help any business, not just Island Specialties, educate its consumer base and vendors against plastic waste, especially single-use plastic, and how to do so safely during a pandemic. The suggestions the article makes can be beneficial in creating a conversation with the entire production and consumption line and their concerns around the pandemic-environmental crisis, which businesses can then use to detail product selection, advertisements on social media, and update safety measures they have in place.

A highly recommended way that Georgetown County can implement eco-friendly measures is by issuing a plastic bag ban, either county-wide or in certain cities. A nearby area that has passed this ordinance is Surfside Beach. This stops the distribution and use of regular, single-use plastic bags from grocery stores, retailers, and at special events. In a Georgetown Times news article, Councilwoman Julie Samples said it best; “This is important to all of us who live on the coast,” ... “It sends a message to our residents and visitors that we care about our beach and the ocean to not only begin the conversation but to put our words into action.”¹⁷. This would be great to execute for businesses along waterways and in Pawleys Island, and this ban can be customized to fit the needs of the county. For example, it can be implemented only for the tourist summer seasons, to help struggling businesses who may not be able to afford or find paper/ eco-friendly options year-round. Another option is that it can be put in place for certain business industries and not for others, as some food services may need to use plastic bags to stay

¹⁷ Anita Crone, “Surfside Beach Approves Ban on Plastic Bags; New Law Takes Effect June 1,” Post and Courier (The Post and Courier, August 19, 2020)

within sanitation requirements, especially during a pandemic. These suggestions are great ways to compromise with businesses in the county and help deter plastic bags and packaging out of the local environment.

The city of Seattle, Washington, has also put in a plastic bag ban. Their bag ban is a bit different, as they have banned plastic bags less than 2.25 ml thick that are brown or green colored, including the small produce bags found in grocery stores¹⁸. However, there are exceptions to this ban, in which plastic bags are allowed for bulk food purchases, meats, flowers, bakery goods and prescriptions, newspapers, door hanger bags, and dry cleaning¹⁹. This ban also executes a minimum 5¢ tax that retailers must put on large paper bags, but small paper bags are completely free¹⁸. This tax is shown on the receipt to the customer as its own charge. The reason for this 5¢ fee is that it incentivizes consumers to bring their own reusable bags and reduce pollution. This is a lot like what Island Specialties is trying to do with our own reusable bag program, but instead we are offering discounts for bringing back the reusable bag. Changing the culture around single-use bags is the goal, which the city of Seattle fully recognizes.

The last look into other cities' sustainable measures lands in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania with their sustainable business tax credit. This decision can create a lot of opportunity for Georgetown County by bringing in more jobs and businesses. Creating healthy competition between businesses in the county never hurt, either. The city of Philadelphia has strict criteria for businesses to be able to get the credit, one of them being certified as a B Corporation²⁰. The amount of tax credit that a business receives varies based on gross receipts and net income²⁰. Qualifications for the tax credit also include analyzing what type of business or service is

¹⁸ "Bag Requirements," Bag Requirements - Utilities (Seattle Public Utilities, n.d.)

¹⁹ "Plastic Bag Ban," Plastic Bag Ban - Council (Seattle City Council, n.d.)

²⁰ "Sustainable Business Tax Credit: Service," City of Philadelphia, n.d.

offered, how sustainable that business or service is, and what measures are being taken to promote sustainability. This is more than just doing reusable bags and cleaning up beaches- they want to see creation of economic opportunity, providing low-income communities with benefits, as well as promoting accessible and decent education and knowledge for all communities²¹.

Georgetown County could benefit greatly by analyzing the Comprehensive Plan to see if this is something that could be done. Since most of the county is comprised of small businesses, this is a great way to pressure that corporations become responsible for their environmental and social footprint while financially incentivizing it. The specifics of who exactly would pay for this tax credit would need to be discussed with businesses and taxpayers of the county.

Empirical Data

Before Georgetown County can attempt to interpret the UN Sustainable Development Goals for the betterment of its citizens, a gaze must be turned towards the demographic that makes up businesses in the county. At first glance, most businesses seem to be local businesses. A business that is either between 250 to 1,500 employees or makes less than \$30 million dollars annually is a small business, but the definition changes by industry²². The Community Profile states that there are no businesses in Georgetown County operating with more than 250 employees in both tables shown for “Employers by Size of Establishment” and “Employment by Size of Establishment”²³. Therefore, when considering other factors alongside this information, one can estimate that 75% to 85% of all businesses operated in Georgetown County are small, local businesses. That same report listed the top twenty employers in the county, with all but

²¹ “Sustainable Business Tax Credit: Service,” City of Philadelphia, n.d.

²² *Sba.gov* (SBA, August 19, 2019)

²³ (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

seven listed companies having their headquarters currently in or having been founded in Georgetown County. Furthermore, within the report mentioned, Georgetown county's top three industries are health care and social assistance, followed by accommodation and food services, then retail trade. These three industries bring in almost 10,000 employment opportunities²⁴, but they are also the three industries hit hardest by the COVID-19 Global Pandemic.

Globally, businesses struggle to stay sanitary and find PPE during this COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore their plastic production and consumption has only skyrocketed from previous years. There was ~30% more plastic waste being generated in 2020 than the 8 million metric tons in 2019, setting new global records²⁵. Businesses had to find finances to pay for the single-use plastic packaging that customers needed, while also finding the revenue to stay afloat to serve those customers. With a cultural stigma against reusable items with customers growing²⁶, businesses cannot afford the reusable, sustainable, or eco-friendly solutions that they might have wanted to turn towards before the pandemic began. This is also because the oil and natural gas market collapsed during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and it made the price of virgin plastic cheaper than any reusable, sustainable, or eco-friendly raw material to make a product with²⁷. The price of virgin plastic was already the cheapest way to go, but the collapse made it an extreme cost-saving measure for already struggling businesses. It is estimated that in South Carolina, 1 in 4 businesses have considered shutting down due to the COVID-19

²⁴ (S.C. Department of Employment and Workforce, Business Intelligence Department, January 26, 2021)

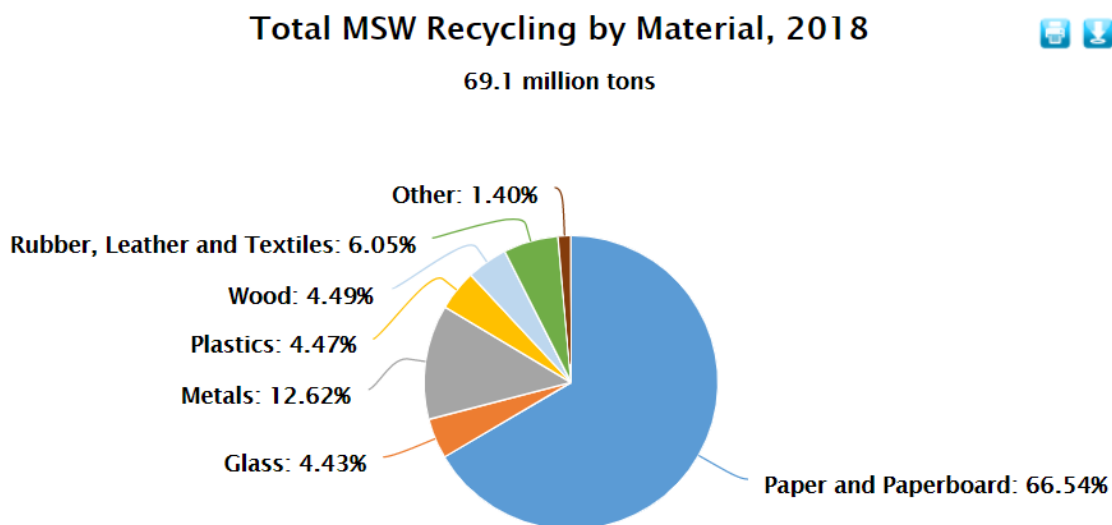
²⁵ Dave Ford, "COVID-19 Has Worsened the Ocean Plastic Pollution Problem," *Scientific American* (Scientific American, August 17, 2020)

²⁶ Kumar Raja Vanapalli et al., "Challenges and Strategies for Effective Plastic Waste Management during and Post COVID-19 Pandemic," *Science of The Total Environment* (Elsevier, August 4, 2020)

²⁷ Dave Ford, "COVID-19 Has Worsened the Ocean Plastic Pollution Problem," *Scientific American* (Scientific American, August 17, 2020)

pandemic²⁸. Although there is some government assistance towards small businesses, there is not enough money to go around. Small businesses make up 99.4% of the employment in South Carolina, and it employs well over 800,000 thousand people.²⁹ This pandemic has made the unemployment rate for South Carolina skyrocket, from a 3.0 in March 2020 to a 11.5 in April of 2020, and as of December 2020, it was at a 5.6 rate.³⁰

Even before the pandemic, the recycling industry was struggling. Only 53.9% of the waste generated was being recycled in 2018 alone.³¹ This pie graph below³² shows the percent of each kind of municipal solid waste being recycled of that 53.9% in 2018 for the entire nation. Municipal solid waste is an industry term for everyday garbage generated by the population.



Notice how plastics, shown in the yellow slice, make up only 4.47% of the recycled material. Of

²⁸ Danielle Seat, “New Survey: 1 in 4 Small Businesses Consider Shutting down Because of COVID-19,” <https://www.live5news.com>, June 16, 2020

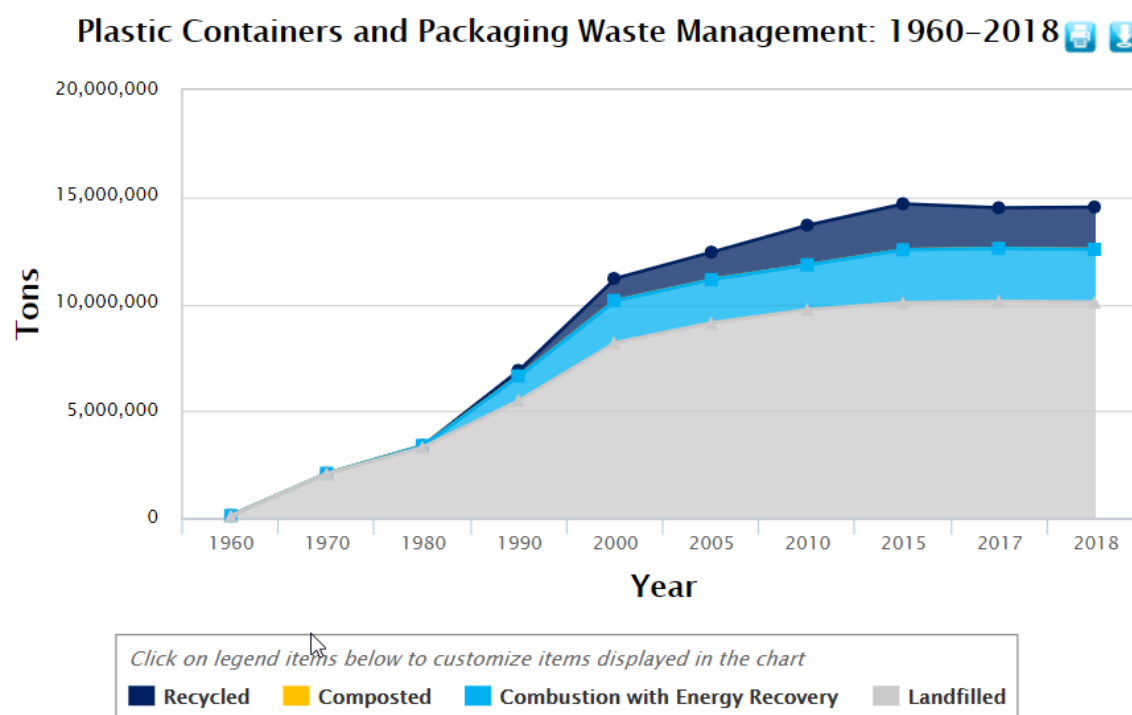
²⁹ U.S. SBA “South Carolina Small Business Profile” (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2020)

³⁰ “Bureau of Labor Statistics Data,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 8, 2021)

³¹ “Containers and Packaging: Product-Specific Data,” EPA (Environmental Protection Agency, January 5, 2021)

³² “The U.S. Recycling System,” EPA (Environmental Protection Agency, November 21, 2019)

69.1 million tons, that is numerically around 3 million tons being recycled. As stated, there is around 8 million metric tons being generated annually, which shows huge evidence that tons of plastic alone are being pumped into Earth's environment from the USA landfills alone. The number of plastic containers and packaging waste management for the nation from 1960 to 2018 is shown in this graph below:³³



Notice that the graph goes above the 8 million metric tons of new plastic being generated each year, that is because it is compounding on top of plastic waste that is already in landfills.

How does Georgetown County compare? I sent a survey out to the Pawleys Island Litchfield Business Association (PILBA), asking its members for honest, anonymous answers about their recycling practices and their confidence in the county's recycling abilities. I only had nine responses, but the data that came out of it showed just how much work needs to be done.

³³ "The U.S. Recycling System," EPA (Environmental Protection Agency, November 21, 2019)

Out of the nine responses, three businesses answer that they do not recycle, and they are in the industries of real estate, retail, and marketing. Their responses, when asked why they did not recycle, included “Not an option for pick-up service”, “Not confident in Georgetown County ‘recycling’. Do paper and glass actually go somewhere different to be processed? Or just dumped in the same landfill?”, and “The County does not make it easy for businesses to recycle”. Additionally, eight out of the nine businesses that took my survey did not know where their waste went after it was sent to the landfill or recycling center. The one other answer to this question chose the option “non applicable”. I also asked the businesses what Georgetown County could do to improve accessibility for businesses to become and stay eco-friendly or sustainable. The answers included: “Add more centers”, “Easier access to recycling”, “Have curbside pick-up”, “Not sure”, and “Give businesses recycling capabilities without an additional cost to do so. Also, the County can do a better job in communicating to the residents and businesses where the waste goes and what it is used for- communicating the benefits and the importance of the benefits.” All in all, these nine businesses are not confident in Georgetown County’s ability and accessibility towards proper recycling and waste management, and it shows in these responses.

Recommendations & Conclusion

To help Georgetown County reach local and UN sustainable development goals, I personally recommend a revision into certain policies that hinder the county’s small businesses from becoming leaders in environmental impact consciousness. There are many routes policy makers and leaders in the county can decide to take, and I will be examining the benefits and consequences of each of these paths that I recommend.

The first policy I heavily encourage revising for the county includes sharing more information with the businesses on where their waste is going after it is dropped off at the

recycling center or landfill. As I have disclosed in a survey sent to the PILBA, those local businesses who answered do not have confidence that their trash is being handled correctly. Sharing more information to businesses and the general public can improve satisfaction rates, and businesses can make better informed decisions about how they choose to deal with waste and recycling. Communication between local governments and businesses should make businesses feel informed and a major part of the conversation, with input changing policies or rules instead of just changing minds. I believe businesses will have improved confidence in the county if the two work together as a team towards improving the local environment. The only setback the county could experience by doing this is if legal matters stop them from sharing important information to businesses.

Moreover, I also recommend implementing a plastic bag ban in parts of Georgetown County. Even if the county did this only for the tourist summer season in Pawleys Island, they can expect a serious decrease in the amount of trash that collects along roadsides, in rivers, and across the local beaches. Doing this would also slowly introduce the citizens of the county into a new change, that could then be turned into a new “normal”. I have previously examined examples of plastic bag bans in this report, like in the City of Seattle and Surfside Beach of Horry County. A consequence of doing this is businesses will have to pay more to use paper bags, but this is about a four-cent difference from plastic bags³⁴, which most businesses can readily afford. Overall, I highly recommending doing this for the county, as litter is a big concern with local goals³⁵, and this is a major watershed community that values protecting the local environment.

³⁴ “What Is the Real Cost of Paper Vs Plastic?,” BMT, October 26, 2020

³⁵ *City of Georgetown Comprehensive Plan* (City of Georgetown, November 8, 2011)

Another path the county can take is implementing a tax break for companies that meet certain sustainability criteria, like in the City of Philadelphia. Implementing a change like this for the county can generate a lot of financial opportunity, and it would be strict criteria for the businesses- it can incentivize local stores towards this goal if they know they can benefit from it. The rules/ criteria can be created through a conversation between the county and businesses, so that both feel they are heard in the creation of this. The county could take a different approach to this same idea by implementing a tax/ tariff against emissions or chemical run-off by local businesses. For example, taxing a water-treatment facility heavily if they are dumping over a legally allowed limit of brine (another word for saline wastewater, which can disrupt freshwater reserves and local marine life) into local waterways until they go back under an allowed limit, hypothetically. This could be implemented in many ways, but future studies should be done on the most concerning corporations in the area to see how they are impacting the local environment. This recommendation can generate financial and environmental responsibility with businesses in the county. Plus, if this is marketed correctly and citizens are educated about the benefits of this, it can turn Georgetown County into a coveted area for businesses looking for an eco-friendly reputation to place their businesses while saving our environment.

All in all, Georgetown County is on the right track towards meeting local and UN sustainability goals. There are policies that the county does to unintentionally hinder businesses towards reaching those goals, but there are also initiatives that help the community take a step in the right direction. In this small business dominant, rural-suburban, watershed community, plastic waste can no longer be swept under the rug, especially during a global pandemic. Although plastic packaging is necessary in certain industries, the large unnecessary impact from retail trade and the medical industries in the county need better accommodations and

accessibility to recycling and reuse options that protect the integrity of the local environment, local economy, and quality of life.

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