



Print this Page

[Return to story](#)

## Region trying to clean up its act PROGRAMS TO FIGHT LITTER

August 2, 2008 12:15 am

By KELLY HANNON

It takes one to five years for a single cigarette butt to decompose.

That's a short life span, compared with the decade or two it takes a plastic bag to break down.

Aluminum cans last 200 to 500 years. And glass bottles are the worst--about a million years from your lips to decomposition.

All this trash winds up in the region's parks and tourist areas, said Laurel Hammig, a regional planner for the George Washington Regional Commission in Fredericksburg.

The trash-lined roads include Interstate 95, State Route 3, U.S. 17 and U.S. 301, all main routes into the Fredericksburg area. They are the first thing tourists see when they arrive.

Hammig is working on several litter-collection programs to clean them up.

The latest is funded with a \$13,000 grant from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality to place litter bags in rest stops, visitors centers and tourism attractions around Fredericksburg, in the hopes of keeping roads clean.

Posters explain the campaign, called "Litter: It Just Isn't Natural."

"We wanted to concentrate on our highly visible places that tourists would be coming, so we could target our first-impressions corridors," said Hammig, a 2006 graduate of the University of Mary Washington, where she was recycling coordinator for her dorm, Bushnell Hall.

The litter bags are available at the Fredericksburg Welcome Center on I-95 and the King George Welcome Center on U.S. 301. The bags have also been placed at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park visitor centers and at Gari Melchers Home and Studio at Belmont.

"We got feedback from the visitors center that litter bags are still really popular," Hammig said.

The bags are designed to hang over a car window's hand crank, although that may be outmoded for vehicles with power windows. Still, motorists can keep trash in the car instead of pitching it out the

window.

Most of the trash near the battlefield park comes from local traffic, not tourists, and is found where the park meets state roads: Route 3 and Mine, Lansdowne and Orange Plank roads, said Brian Dendis, maintenance chief for the park.

"It's a lot of beer bottles, beer cans and fast-food wrappers," he said.

Discarded cigarette butts are a widespread trash problem on all area roads.

"That is the most common litter," Hammig said.

Hammig says she cringes whenever she sees a cigarette flicked out a car window, knowing how long it will take to decompose.

"I find myself wanting to go and chase them down and chastise them--which I don't--but it definitely has made me more aware," she said.

Instead of chasing litterbugs, Hammig makes a "conscious effort to do my part to clean up my neighborhood."

"Litter: It Just Isn't Natural" will last one year in the Fredericksburg area. After that, Hammig hopes to apply for another grant to start a litter-collection program unique to the area.

"Hopefully with these materials, people can recognize we're trying to tackle the problem," Hammig said.

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The "Litter: It Just Isn't Natural" program has been used around Virginia since 2003. Here are some other ongoing trash-collection programs:

In Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park, Friends of Wilderness Battlefield and the Knights of Columbus regularly help collect trash. The Park Service has an annual cleanup day, when all employees pick up litter, and inmates at the Rappahannock Regional Jail help. Maintenance chief Brian Dendis hopes the campaign will encourage children who visit the park to take the message home to their parents.

The Virginia Department of Transportation encourages residents to "adopt" a section of road and keep it clean. Laurel Hammig, a planner with the George Washington Regional Commission, is working on a program that assigns sections of highway to people on probation.

--Kelly Hannon

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