Recycling Barriers Study, 2026
Public Engagement Findings: A Preview

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This **preliminary** findings summary highlights public feedback from the 2026 region-wide Recycling Barriers Study, a collaborative partnership between the Central Virginia Waste Management Authority (CVWMA) and PlanRVA. June through September, we engaged residents across the region to understand their lived experiences, daily challenges, and creative ideas regarding local recycling systems and needs.

While these early insights offer an important snapshot of community perspectives, **a complete analysis and final recommendations will be delivered in the full study report on December 31, 2026.**

Numbers

Type of Engagement	N / Scope	Collection window	Strength(s)
Online Survey	2,223 respondents	June 8 – Sept 1, 2026	Scale; closed-ended statistics across the full region
Listening sessions	333 in-person 1:1 listening sessions	July 11 – Aug 29, 2026	Real-time, on-the-spot responses incl. non-recyclers reached in person
Town Halls & 1:1 listening sessions	3 town halls + 13 1:1 listening sessions	Aug 5 – Aug 26, 2026	Depth, locality-specific texture, and direct quotes

Themes:

The most common desired changes are **clearer instructions on how to recycle correctly, lower-cost or tax-supported service, greater confidence that collected materials are "*actually*" recycled, and more convenient collection and access.**

Findings suggest that the region has a **service-design and trust challenge**, more than an awareness challenge. **People want to recycle more!** They want more materials to be accepted, and they want access to recycling collection in more places.

Structural Barriers

- **Access**, not attitude, drives non-recycling. Structural reasons (no bin, no pickup, cost, landlord non-provision) outweigh attitudinal ones by a wide margin.
    - Access barriers are most prevalent for suburban communities where service is opt-in, rural communities that rely on drop-off centers, and multifamily buildings.
    - *"Our curbside trash service not having separate recycling bins is definitely a barrier. We collect some items to take to the transfer station, but it's inconvenient to go there and we don't go there super regularly so our recyclables pile up."*
    - *"I was an avid recycler with 3 bins to set out weekly in Henrico County. In Goochland there is no option so recycling ended."*

- **Cost** – A repeated theme is that separate fees create a meaningful participation barrier. Cost is a point of frustration across all community and housing types, but especially in suburban communities that contract with their own private haulers.
    - People expressed frustration that the burden of recycling is put on individual homeowners, while building managers, HOAs, and businesses are under no obligation and often refuse to provide access.

Informational Barriers

- Residents in all localities and housing types expressed deep distrust and concern about the efficacy of recycling.
    - There is a persistent myth – even among households that recycle religiously – that most of the materials collected for recycling end up in a landfill or is shipped to other countries as pollution.
    - Even people who believe that recycling matters and that it does make a difference express a desire for more visibility into the process and the results of their efforts. People want to know specific details about where their materials are going and what new items they become.
    - When asked what would help them recycle more, **53% of survey respondents said, 'Knowing that my recycling is actually being recycled'.**
    - *"Show me that it's actually valuable and doesn't get diverted to a landfill."*
    - *"I'd like to know it's really being recycled — I would want proof and statistics."*

- Confusion about what's accepted and how much effort is required to prepare materials for recycling is extremely prevalent.

    - The 'details' really hang people up – what to do with labels, lids, food contamination, mixed material
    - **32% of survey respondents said "Clearer information about what's accepted" would help them recycle more.**

- Top 5 things people want to recycle but can't (or don't know how):

Soft plastic (including bags)	48
Electronics	36
Glass	35
Food waste	25
Fabrics	23

Numbers are how many times that item was called out in written comments.

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