

What's Up, College Station Transcript (Season 4, Episode 29)

Grace Hollowell: What's up, College Station? I'm Grace Hollowell. Today I'm joined once again by Caroline Ask, our Solid Waste Division Manager. Hi, Caroline.

Caroline Ask: Hi, Grace. Thanks for having me.

Grace Hollowell: You're welcome. We have you on the show from time to time to talk about trash, and it is about that time when students are moving back into town. That brings a lot more trash for y'all to collect, so we're going to share some tips on how to make things easier for us and for residents moving in. As a quick refresher, tell us a little bit about you and what you do for the city.

Caroline Ask: I'm the solid waste division manager. My team handles all solid waste collections, whether it's a home, a multi-family complex, hospital systems, or Walmart—we service everyone. The only items we don't collect are construction and demolition debris or hazardous waste like asbestos. My team handles the rest.

Grace Hollowell: When you think about how many homes and businesses are in College Station, that is a lot of trash to collect.

Caroline Ask: And we're growing. Every time I drive down a new section of the city, Northgate, or the south side, there's construction everywhere. That's great for us and means lots of new infrastructure, but it also means more accounts for us to take care of. We do get a say in how those are designed, and we're excited about all the new things coming into College Station.

Grace Hollowell: What changes for you and your team during move-in versus move-out or the rest of the year?

Caroline Ask: We have a very transient community, meaning a large portion of our population moves around at the exact same time because it's tied to the Texas A&M school system and semesters. About 75,000 to 80,000 people move into a new home. You have a lot of boxes and you're getting rid of stuff at the same time because you don't want to move it to your new place. That increases the workload for our team—it's a bunch of boxes and waste out on the curb line for a small team to take care of.

Grace Hollowell: Speaking of small teams, how large is your team?

Caroline Ask: Right now we have about 34 operators total, but our bulk and brush team only has about 15 or 16 people handling the entire city. On the residential side, they take care of a little over 5,000 homes per day. You have 52 chances a year—we pick up bulk and

brush every week—but move-in time is like the World Cup for us, where our skills really get put to the test.

Grace Hollowell: I can imagine that for permanent residents doing spring cleaning, getting rid of an old office chair sitting in the garage, this time of year becomes that "later" time.

Caroline Ask: Yes, I am guilty of that as well and am partaking in my team's services at the moment.

Grace Hollowell: That is very unique. In every other place I've lived, you had to call and schedule your bulk pickup, pay extra for it, or it wasn't a weekly service.

Caroline Ask: Our residents are excited that they have so many chances to get rid of items without an additional cost wrapped into it. It also provides a positive on our end: less illegal dumping since you have so many chances to dispose of waste without a fee.

Grace Hollowell: What is your favorite part about your job during this time of year?

Caroline Ask: Helping people and physically seeing that help do good. Residents can see a challenge or issue, and then physically see us pick it up and remove it. Seeing that result and making people happy when items are removed is the best part.

Grace Hollowell: Very happy when things are neat and clean! How can people contact you if they have questions about solid waste and recycling in College Station?

Caroline Ask: If you want to talk to us or any division manager in Public Works directly, call our main line at 979-764-3690, or email us at pubworks@cstx.gov. You can also submit a form via SeeClickFix. There is an actual person on the other end, so we are reviewing them and closing them out to make sure tickets don't sit outstanding.

Grace Hollowell: That is very important! With move-in being one of the busiest times of year for solid waste, why does it create such a unique challenge for your team?

Caroline Ask: Beyond the workload, it is late July and early August, so we are dealing with extreme heat. Be patient with us—we will get to everyone as soon as we can. Remember, you have a collection day, not a collection time. We run our trucks and roll-off boxes until the route is complete, so we may be out on routes until 9 p.m. As long as we have available boxes to fill, we will get to you.

Grace Hollowell: What are some of the most common trash and recycling issues you see during move-in?

Caroline Ask: A common recycling issue is using the recycling cart as an actual trash bin. Don't do that. Recyclables should not be bagged, and if it's filled with garbage, you will end

up with a hefty contamination fee on your utility bill. If you need an extra garbage bin while moving in, let us know and we can get one turned out within 24 to 48 hours.

On the solid waste side, we see mixed piles. We do not want bulk items mixed with brush. We want to remove brush separately so it can go to the landfill to be mulched, while bulk items go into the open cell.

Another challenge is when piles are placed near obstructions. We cannot reach your pile if a car is parked in front of it. Please make sure you and your neighbors do not park in front of bulk and brush piles on your collection day.

Grace Hollowell: Another important thing to keep in mind is space around regular trash bins. Our automated trucks need room to operate.

Caroline Ask: For garbage carts, our automated vehicles have a yellow gripper arm on the right side. That is where our four-foot clearance requirement comes from. Parallel parked cars or stationary items like mailboxes make it difficult, and that gripper arm is forceful—we don't want to cause damage to your vehicle or knock over your mailbox. That four-foot space requirement also applies if you have your garbage cart and recycling cart placed out on the same day.

We've also seen people moving out throw unbagged waste, like old clothes, directly onto front yards or curb lines. Please don't leave free-floating waste; it causes pest issues and frustrates neighbors.

Grace Hollowell: It can cause trouble for local wildlife as well. For students moving into apartments or complexes, what should they know about move-in trash and bulk pickup?

Caroline Ask: For multi-family complexes, larger dumpsters are serviced by front-load trucks with forks, which function differently than gripper arms. When old furniture is placed directly in front of dumpsters, the truck cannot access them. Driver operators cannot physically move heavy mattresses away from dumpsters to service them, so keep the area and interior enclosures clear.

Additionally, don't throw mattresses or large bulk items inside dumpsters. When the dumpster is lifted over the cab to be emptied, heavy items can fall out, smash the truck's windshield, and take that vehicle out of service for repairs. If you are in an apartment complex, talk to your management company or front desk to ask for a designated bulk item location instead of blocking dumpsters.

Grace Hollowell: Reach out to your property management—they will be able to help. One major item associated with moving is cardboard boxes. What is the best way for residents to dispose of them?

Caroline Ask: The best way to dispose of cardboard boxes is to break them down, place them inside your largest box, and set them out on your bulk and brush day. Note that bulk collection does not mean they will be recycled; recycling is handled separately through Brazos Valley Recycling, who provides the navy blue bins.

If you want to recycle your boxes, break them down so you have enough space in your navy blue bin. The same applies to apartment complex dumpsters—flattening boxes prevents containers from overflowing quickly. Alternatively, keep good boxes in your attic or garage for your next move.

Grace Hollowell: What items can residents recycle, and what are the biggest recycling mistakes you see during move-in?

Caroline Ask: Residents can recycle glass of any color, paper products, and plastics numbered 1 and 2. Turn the item over, check the recycling triangle, and verify the number. If it is not a 1 or a 2, dispose of it in the trash to avoid contaminating the recycling stream.

You can also recycle jars, aluminum cans, and steel cans—just ensure everything is rinsed clean. For paper products like cardboard or paperboard, do not include dirty pizza boxes; we cannot recycle grease or food residue.

Grace Hollowell: Are there items that surprise people when they learn they cannot be placed in recycling carts?

Caroline Ask: Certain hard plastic cups from restaurants are great to reuse, but they are not recyclable. Soft plastics like grocery bags are also not accepted in curbside bins because they tangle in the sorting equipment. Take plastic grocery bags back to collection kiosks at store entrances like Walmart or HEB instead.

Grace Hollowell: Do you have tips for reducing waste during move-in, especially for students furnishing an apartment on a budget?

Caroline Ask: Try to reuse as much as you can. Sand down and refinish or paint older furniture. Donate clothes or household goods that are still usable, or swap items with neighbors and roommates.

Grace Hollowell: Facebook Marketplace and local neighborhood groups are great for finding or giving away solid wood furniture too. How can students new to town keep up with their collection schedules?

Caroline Ask: Download the free College Station Curbside app on Google or Apple platforms. Type in your current address, and it populates your exact schedule without requiring personal information.

You can also visit cstx.gov to use the collection schedule portal. You can sign up for push notifications, text alerts, phone calls, or emails to remind you the night before your pick-up days.

Grace Hollowell: That app is very helpful for keeping track of collection days! Going back to apartment complexes, what should residents do if they see illegal dumping or overflowing containers?

Caroline Ask: For illegal dumping, take pictures of the items or boxes—especially if an address is visible—or note the license plate of any vehicle dumping waste. Forward that information to Code Enforcement. Solid Waste handles collection operations, but we collaborate closely with Code Enforcement.

If you see overflowing commercial containers, let us know. We have direct contact information for property managers and commercial accounts to address public health concerns or vector issues quickly.

Grace Hollowell: Looking beyond move-in, what are a few good habits students can adopt year-round?

Caroline Ask: Bag your trash! Dumping loose waste directly into residential trash cans attracts flies and pests and creates health hazards for our collection team. Always use trash bags.

Grace Hollowell: Is there anything else students, parents, or property managers should know before move-in begins?

Caroline Ask: Apartment complexes and commercial accounts do not receive scheduled bulk and brush collections like single-family homes do. They operate on a first-come, first-served basis where management must call us to schedule a pickup or hire a franchise hauler. Property managers need to actively monitor their sites and contact us directly.

Grace Hollowell: Where can people find more information about trash and recycling in the city?

Caroline Ask: Visit cstx.gov/recycle for guides, ordinances, and requirements. You can also download the College Station Curbside app to receive regular updates, service delay notifications, or weather alerts.

Grace Hollowell: Before we go, let's do a quick lightning round of questions. What is one item people think is recyclable that actually isn't?

Caroline Ask: Wire hangers and loose wires. People assume they are recyclable metal, but they get severely tangled in the sorting machinery. Do not put metal hangers in recycling bins.

Grace Hollowell: What is one thing you wish every new resident knew before moving in?

Caroline Ask: Their collection schedule! Your garbage day, bulk and brush day, and recycling day are deliberately set on different days of the week to ensure enough curb space for the automated trucks to operate.

Grace Hollowell: If you could give every Aggie moving into town one piece of advice, what would it be?

Caroline Ask: If you don't know how to dispose of something, call me!

Grace Hollowell: If a dumpster is full, what is the worst thing somebody can do?

Caroline Ask: Put a couch directly in front of it or on top of it.

Grace Hollowell: What is the fastest way for residents to find their collection schedule?

Caroline Ask: Download the app, give us a call, or check the city website.

Grace Hollowell: Thank you so much for joining me today, Caroline.

Caroline Ask: Thanks for having me!

Grace Hollowell: And that's what's up!