

## **Petition to the Town of Chapel Hill for a “Leave the Leaves” Campaign**

Barbara Driscoll, President New Hope Audubon Society

November 4, 2020

This petition asks the town of Chapel Hill to initiate a “Leave the Leaves” Campaign. The campaign will be phased in over several years and begin with public education on the benefits of leaving the leaves on people’s property versus the towns pick up by the Loose Leaf Collection program currently operated by the Public Works Department. This petition is only requesting phasing out of the Loose Leaf Collection program, and not the weekly curbside collection of yard waste.

We’ve met with town staff; and the campaign concept was presented to the Environmental Stewardship Advisory Board on September 14 and Voted on October 13, 2020 (8-0 in favor of undertaking the project). We are happy that this Advisory Board is supporting our proposal.

The Board said: “the [*Environmental Stewardship Advisory*] Board declare support for the Leave the Leaves Campaign and its basic principles, and that the Board urge the Town Council to consider supporting the policy goals proposed within the petition.”

### What is the Town’s Current Program?

- Loose Leaf Collection program is operated in Chapel Hill from mid-October through mid-February
- Street and Public Works Division of Public Works Departments operations:
  - Requires hiring 5-6 additional seasonal staff
  - Four-year average of approximately 1266 dump truck loads per season carrying between 4000-6000 tons of leaves!!
- Solid Waste Department handles weekly curbside yard waste
- Neighbors and Landscape companies blow leaves out into the street
  - Not recommended but this is the reality

- Air and noise pollution from leaf blowing equipment – Many blowers are 2 stroke engines which emit a lot of air pollution
- Leaves block roads, clog street drainage causing roads to locally flood
- Please note that this type of service is not offered in Durham or Chatham County.

#### What are the Environmental Benefits of “Leaving the Leaves”?

- Provide organic matter and build up healthy soil – reduces need for fertilizers – Most gardeners consider leaf mulch as good a “gold” for their yards
- Provides nutrients for trees and shrubs as well as ground cover
- Majority of butterflies, moths and other insects overwinter in the leaf litter -helps promote and protect biodiversity
- Leaf litter provides nutrients via insects for birds, chipmunks, turtles, and amphibians which supports the web of life
- Depresses weeds
- Leaves promote soil moisture retention and reduce water runoff

#### Additional Benefits of Not Collecting Leaves:

- Reduces Flooding – Leaves blocking drainage during high rain events causes excess water and flooding on some roadways – Requiring Stormwater maintenance crews to clean out storm drains
- Masses of leaves going into gutters causes large nutrient loads to streams and waterways –creating algal blooms –harming water quality
- Promotes composting and less lawn waste for City to collect
- Less air and noise pollution from leaf blowers, many of which are highly polluting 2-stroke engines
- Reduced fuel use by town and reduction in greenhouse gases of 45 metric tons per year~1,266 dump truck loads per season
- Significant budgetary savings: Seasonal staff costs \$30,000/year. If the town eliminates the loose leaf program – net savings anticipated in first year would be \$225, 740; second year \$89, 740 and after first two years a

savings of \$45,300 per year (See Attachment provided by Mike Wright, Public Works Department)

- No elimination of permanent staff positions; rather staff would better devote time to maintenance related issues with streets.

Proposed Phased in approach:

- Begins with public education on benefits of leaving the leaves
  - Public Works is already working on messaging for 2020-2021
  - ESAB and New Hope Audubon Society will also assist with messaging and educational materials
- Potentially reduced loose leaf collections first year (2020/2021) – phasing in over several years until program is eliminated
- Education campaign would make it clear that Solid Waste Service would continue weekly curbside collection
- Challenges: Anticipate negative reactions from some Landscaping companies and some homeowners who value “pristine” yards



Town of Chapel Hill  
Public Works Department

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[www.townofchapelhill.org](http://www.townofchapelhill.org)

October 12, 2020

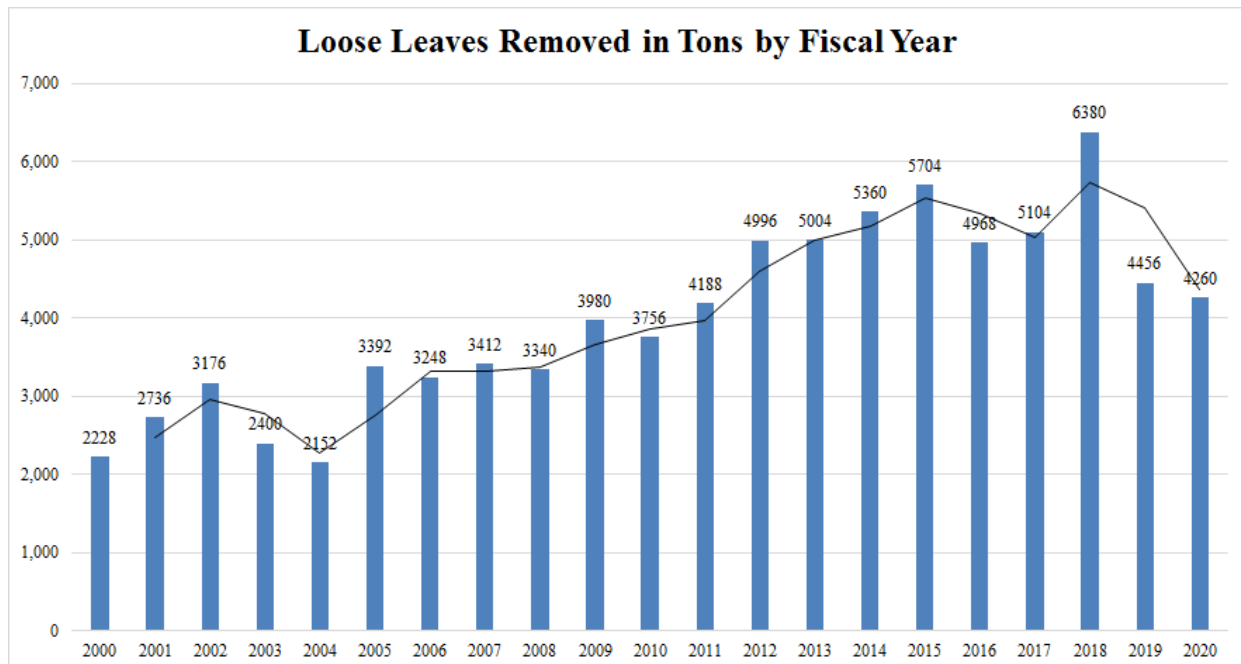
Dear Barbara Driscoll,

This email is in response to your request for information about the Town's Loose Leaf Collection Program and funding. Thank you for your patience. I hope the below information will be helpful.

### Loose Leaf Collection Program

The Loose Leaf Collection Program is a popular service that has been offered by the Public Works Department for more than 40 years. The program collects loose leaves and pine straw from residential neighborhoods from late October to late February. In addition to the Loose Leaf Collection Program, Solid Waste Services provides weekly curbside collection of containerized yard waste.

Based on a four-year average, the Town picks up ~1,266 dump truck loads per season. The amount of leaves changes each year based on weather conditions and maturity of the trees. Below is the history of leaf collections for the past 20 fiscal years.



We take the leaves to homeowners, farms and large nurseries for composting. In recent years, some of the nurseries and farms no longer need our leaves so we are identifying other sites for recycling. [Loose leaf delivery](#) is available at no charge to the community for mulch and compost.

## Funding

The Town of Chapel Hill completes loose leaf collection from the allocated \$2.635M budget of the Streets and Construction division of the Public Works Department. This division is also responsible for maintaining Town-maintained sidewalks and streets. This includes preparation for and response to weather events, such as plowing snow or removing fallen trees from streets.

Staffing levels for the loose leaf program change from year to year based on turnover and retirements. Yearly changes in leaf tonnage require temporary staff to support the loose leaf collection program. In recent years, we have hired 5-6 temporary staff to help collect loose leaves due to limited internal staff capacity. We spend approximately \$30,000 on these positions each year for loose leaf collection, which is 1% of the Streets and Construction budget.

If the Town eliminated the loose leaf program, we would anticipate generating the following in net savings in the first two years:

	Year 1	Year 2
Overtime for permanent employees	\$ 10,800	\$ 10,800
Temporary staff positions	\$ 30,000	\$ 30,000
Equipment maintenance and repair	\$ 40,000	\$ 40,000
Fuel	\$ 4,500	\$ 4,500
Savings in not replacing equipment	\$ 60,000	\$ 60,000
One-time sale of equipment	\$136,000	---
Increase in materials for patching	-\$ 30,000	-\$ 30,000
Increase in landfill fees	-\$ 25,560	-\$ 25,560
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$225,740</b>	<b>\$ 89,740</b>

After the first two years, we estimate the net savings at approximately \$45,300 per year.

Reducing this service would not include eliminating permanent staff positions because employees who collect loose leaves are primarily devoted to other core business programs. By eliminating loose leaf collection, these employees could devote additional time to complete needed maintenance related to streets, gravel sidewalks, right-of-way, traffic signs and markings, and stormwater drainage. This will require an increase in materials, including bulk asphalt for patching.

In addition to savings from eliminating this program, we anticipate having additional costs including increased tipping fees at landfills due to tonnage increases. Town residents wishing to dispose of leaves would be required to purchase a Town yard waste roll cart or place leaves in yard waste bags. We expect to collect more tons of yard waste due to the containerized leaves, with a corresponding increase in tipping fees of about \$25,560. This is calculated assuming that residents will containerize 30% of last year's leaf tonnage if we no longer offer loose leaf collection. We anticipate residents will use alternative methods to dispose of their remaining leaves such as composting and/or private collection.

## Environmental Implications

### *Localized Flooding*

Leaves are common items that the Stormwater maintenance crew cleans out of storm drains. This can occur when piles of loose leaves are left in the street rather than behind the curb. Leaves can block storm drains causing runoff to spread out into travel lanes and/or may cause problems for people who ride bikes, walk, or drive. Leaves can also accumulate in the pipes causing blockages.

### *Nutrient Pollution*

Loose leaves and other yard waste can be sources of nutrient pollution in local streams and ponds. Leaves contain phosphorus and nitrogen, which are natural fertilizers. When the leaves fall, they decompose and rain washes the natural fertilizers out of them. When left on lawns, these fertilizers are recycled back into the soil, supporting plant growth in the spring and reducing the need for chemical fertilizers.

When washed down storm drains and into streams and ponds, the phosphorus and nitrogen encourage growth of algae that can interfere with recreation, reduce the amount of oxygen in the water needed to sustain fish and aquatic life, and contribute to the growth of potentially toxic algal blooms. The Town's street sweeping program helps reduce nutrient pollution by reducing the amount of yard debris that drain into local streams.

### *Composting*

Another beneficial use of leaves is composting them at home. Leaves can play an essential role in making a rich compost that can improve soils, retain water, and repel weeds. Brown leaves are an excellent source of carbon that bring balance to nitrogen-rich garden wastes in the composting process. The finished compost can be applied to flower or garden beds around the home.

### **Outreach**

You will soon see messaging on Town channels, including [townofchapelhill.org/news](http://townofchapelhill.org/news), about our request to residents this year to consider composting or containerizing their loose leaves. We are working with limited staffing this year due to COVID-19. And, where there are position vacancies, we are not able to hire due to a hiring freeze in the interest of conserving the budget with projected reduced tax revenue.

We will ask our residents that, whenever possible, they compost or containerize their loose leaves in the roll carts or brown bags to allow the materials to be picked up on the regular yard waste collection schedule rather than the season loose leaf collection that uses the vacuum trucks.

Please let me know if you have questions or need any other information.

Sincerely,

Mike Wright

### **Public Works Department**

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P: 919-969-5084  
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Attachment 2: Examples of Educational Posters from Xerces.org

<p>Caterpillars of fritillary butterflies overwinter in fall leaves - so please</p> <h1>LEAVE THE LEAVES</h1>  <p>xerces.org Photo by John Flannery / Flickr</p>	<p>At the end of summer, bumble bee queens burrow just below the soil to wait out winter. Give them the extra protection they need.</p> <h1>LEAVE THE LEAVES</h1>  <p>xerces.org Photo by Rich Hatfield</p>
<p>The red-banded hairstreak lays its eggs on fallen oak leaves - which become the first food for hungry caterpillars when they hatch.</p> <h1>LEAVE THE LEAVES</h1>  <p>xerces.org Photo by John Flannery / Flickr</p>	<p>The beautiful luna moth overwinters as a cocoon in fall leaves. Don't toss out this treasure!</p> <h1>LEAVE THE LEAVES</h1>  <p>xerces.org Photo by woodleywonderworks / Flickr</p>



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