



Swap Shops: Cost-Effective Residential Reuse

FACT SHEET

WHAT IS A SWAP SHOP?

A swap shop is an organized shed where citizens in a community may donate items they no longer need that can then be reused by others. Various household items such as furniture, clothes, books, toys and many other products can be “exchanged” at a swap shop rather than disposed of in a landfill. Swap shops are especially appropriate at staffed collection centers where an attendant can maintain the area to ensure only acceptable items are kept. Appropriate signage, indicating acceptable items and procedures, and sufficient education efforts are important factors in the success of swap shops.

MAIN PURPOSE AND BENEFITS OF SWAP SHOPS

Swap shops are set up to keep reusable materials out of the landfill. At a swap shop, citizens can leave items that they no longer need but which still have a useful life. Others can then reuse donated items. Many areas exchange materials on an informal basis, but an organized shed maintained by an attendant allows significantly greater diversion of reusable materials in a manner that protects public health and safety.

Swap shops are not intended to be a service such as those provided by charity organizations that reserve items only for the most needy in the community. In fact, one of the main benefits of a swap shop is that it provides an organized and popular opportunity for all citizens in a community to exchange and “swap” materials, thus diverting reusable materials from disposal.

Reuse through swap shops provides one of the most cost-effective ways communities can reduce materials disposed of in a landfill. For a small investment, a community can build a shed that provides years of reuse opportunities. As citizens realize a direct, local benefit, swap shops are frequently one of the most popular components of a solid waste program.

SWAP SHOP DESIGNS

Swap shops are generally three-sided sheds with a roof. Depending on a community’s need and space constraints, dimensions may range from an average 100 to 200 square feet, up to about 450 square feet. Swap shops can be framed out of new or salvaged wood or purchased as a prefabricated unit. They generally sit on a concrete pad and are equipped with shelves and hooks to organize materials. There is plenty of room for creativity and community input to help design a shed.

USE AND MAINTENANCE

Most swap shops operate on a first-come, first-serve basis. Swap shops work best at staffed collection centers because the attendant can help keep the shed neat and organized. Unusable materials or low-quality items that remain in the shed for a long period of time should be discarded to make room for new items. If quality materials remain longer than a given amount of time—perhaps two weeks—local PTA thrift shops or missions can be encouraged to collect them. A swap shop may also contain an exchange board where people can post notices of items they have for exchange but do not want to transport. The Albemarle Regional Solid Waste Management Authority has also found that swap shops provide convenient places for organized “paint swap” events where citizens can trade their reusable paints.

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IMPLEMENTATION STEPS

For local governments interested in installing swap shops, the following guidance is offered based on experiences of other North Carolina communities.

- It is important to make clear decisions on what items will be accepted. Most swap shops accept general household items with the exception of tires, broken items, paint, chemicals or any type of liquid product.
- It is helpful to install racks and shelves to organize items (make sure shelves and racks are attached to the shed or labeled to indicate they are county property).
- Adequate signage indicating proper procedures for both picking up and dropping off materials is a key component of an effective swap shop system.
- Many counties seek to limit liability by including signage indicating the county does not own any of the items in the swap shop. Contact your county/city attorney for assistance in developing such language.
- Maintenance time should be minimal but it is very important! Ensure site attendants are maintaining swap shops by clearing out unacceptable items and sweeping the floor regularly. Encourage site attendants to think of the sheds as retail stores and to display items so they can be clearly seen. Remove unclaimed items (even if they are of good quality) every two weeks to make room for new items. Where possible, re-bag unclaimed clothing and other items for charitable organizations.
- Consider putting a limit on the number of items individuals can take per day. For example, users can take up to five items per day in Chatham County and three per day at all four shops in the Albemarle Region. This approach limits the tendency for people to collect items for resale in flea markets or thrift stores.

MAIN CHALLENGES

Despite following the steps listed above, challenges may still occur when improper procedures are followed and unacceptable items are dropped off on a regular basis. This can create a burden for staff and require extra time to remove unusable or unacceptable items. In addition, swap shops may become overly cluttered.

Based on the experiences of other counties that run efficient swap shop programs, both clear signage and regular maintenance are extremely important factors in overcoming these challenges (especially in the beginning stages of the program). Macon County found that a locked door system allows staff to prescreen all items being dropped off in order to ensure only acceptable items are kept and to prevent the swap shop from becoming overly crowded. Although a locked shed is a viable option if problems with unacceptable procedures become too severe, it is important to note that an open shed system provides the most opportunity for exchange and reuse.

SAMPLE BUDGET

Below is a possible budget range to develop a swap shop.

Items	Estimated Cost
Prefabricated structure or constructed building	\$2,000- \$5,000
Concrete pad	\$600-\$1,200
Shelving	\$150-\$500
Signs, bulletin board and durable supplies	\$300 - \$900
Total	\$3,000-7,000

The total cost to start a swap shop ranges between \$3,000 and \$7,000. This is just an estimate—the costs can vary greatly based on several factors such as: 1) the type of shed (e.g. prefabricated structure vs. a constructed shed); 2) whether a concrete pad or excavation is required at the site; 3) whether additions such as carports exist; and 4) the amount of money spent on signage and additional education materials.

EXAMPLES

To learn more about a swap shop program, refer to the following examples. All three cases provide examples of counties that have effectively implemented a swap shop program at one or more staffed convenience centers. The three cases below each offer a unique example of a swap shop program.

Chatham County, N.C., Swap Shop Program*

Chatham County has swap shops at all 12 of its solid waste convenience centers. The shops are three-sided, roofed shelters outfitted with several racks for clothes, shelves, a bulletin board, and an area for toys and small appliances. They sit on concrete pads and measure 10 ft. x 13 ft. Collection center attendants generally spend five percent of their time monitoring and maintaining the swap shops. They make sure items are reusable and not dangerous. Originally, electronic devices were not allowed in swap shops, but the issuance of signs (drafted by the county attorney) waiving the liability for the county and the staffing contractor, now makes it possible to include those items.

If quality materials remain longer than two weeks, the local PTA thrift store or a local mission is welcome to collect the materials. It is estimated that more than 70 percent of what goes into the swap shops is reused, and the rest eventually is thrown away. Eighty-seven percent of those surveyed at the collection centers felt the swap shops were a valuable service. Chatham County's swap shops were constructed for \$2,000 to \$3,000 per building (including lumber, concrete pad, shingles and labor).

Unique Aspects:

- A swap shop is in place at all 12 collection centers where people are already bringing their garbage or recyclables.
- The county included language in its solid waste ordinance to support swap shops.

*The full-text version of this case study is located at <http://www.p2pays.org/bmp/main/chathamswap.pdf>

ARSWMA: Regional Approach to Swap Shops**

The Albemarle Regional Solid Waste Management Authority (ARSWMA), located in the northeastern corner of North Carolina, instituted a swap shop program at staffed convenience centers in four of the region's seven counties: Currituck, Perquimans, Chowan and Gates. The swap shops accept most household items, with the exception of clothing, mattresses and box springs, tires, broken items, paint, chemicals or any type of liquid product. The staff member on-site is responsible for maintaining and cleaning out the swap shop. The overall maintenance time for each swap shop is minimal, consisting of approximately two hours per week.

Despite a few inevitable challenges, the swap shops have been a success and ARSWMA has observed that citizens are definitely utilizing the swap shops to acquire materials, thus keeping them empty a good part of the time. The total cost for the first two sheds purchased and installed in Currituck and Chowan counties—including all appropriate signage—was \$9,200, or \$4,600 per prefabricated structure. Due to carport-type attachments, the first two sheds were more expensive than the second set, which cost \$3,200 each.

Unique Aspects:

- ARSWMA took a regional approach and implemented swap shop programs in four counties across the region.
- In one county, citizens have voluntarily adopted the shed and have helped to maintain and organize it on their own.

**The full-text version of this case study is located at <http://www.p2pays.org/ref/26/25015.pdf>

Macon County: Shed Constructed from Salvaged Materials***

Macon County built a 12 ft. x 12 ft. shed for a swap shop using salvaged timber wood for the frame and siding recovered from the county's construction and demolition debris (C&D) landfill. The swap shop is located at one of the county's 11 convenience centers. The convenience center site attendant is responsible for the maintenance and upkeep of the swap shop, which includes ensuring only acceptable items remain in the shed. The county accepts most household items, including appliances that are fully functional and furniture in usable condition. To combat the problems associated with inappropriate items being dropped off, the county went from an open door system to a locked shed. Under the current system, citizens who want to either drop off or pick up materials must first obtain the key from the site attendant. To prevent the swap shop from becoming overly crowded and cluttered, there is a limit of five items that can be dropped off per person per trip with no limit to the number of items that people can pick up. Although there is no quantitative data available, the county recycling coordinator has observed that there is a high rate of exchange, that there has been no decrease in usage of the swap shop since the lock was placed on the door, and that the swap shop is very popular among citizens. Cost to construct the swap shop building was approximately \$5,000.

Unique Aspects:

- Macon County built the shed from reclaimed timber wood and siding salvaged from the C&D landfill.
- The county locks the shed door and citizens must obtain the key from the site attendant to use the swap shop.

***The full text version of this case study is located at <http://www.p2pays.org/ref/26/25963.pdf>

Additional Communities

The cases listed above are not the only examples of swap shop programs in North Carolina. In fact, more than 30 counties/municipalities have swap shops. Below is an extensive list of North Carolina communities that have one or more swap shop program in place.

County/Municipality	# of Swap Shops	County/Municipality	# of Swap Shops
Alexander County	1	Jones County	1
Ashe County	2	Macon County	1
Bladen County	2	McDowell County	1
Brunswick County	1	Mecklenburg County	4
Caswell County	1	Moore County	1
Chatham County	12	Northampton County	1
Cherokee County	2	Orange County	4
Chowan County	1	Pasquotank County	1
City of Durham	1	Perquimans County	1
Currituck County	1	Pitt County	2
Davidson County	1	Rowan County	9
Duplin County	3	Scotland County	5
Durham County	1	Watauga County	1
Franklin County	1	Wayne County	1
Gates County	1	Wilkes County	3
Granville County	2	Wilson County	1
Jackson County	2		

To contact a representative from one of the communities listed above, visit the Local Government Contacts Web page at <http://www.p2pays.org/localgov/PAYT/ncwaste.asp>.



The N.C. Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance provides free, non-regulatory technical assistance and training on methods to eliminate, reduce or recycle wastes before they become pollutants or require disposal. Telephone DPPEA at (919) 715-6500 or (800) 763-0136 or e-mail nowaste@p2pays.org for assistance with issues in this fact sheet or any of your waste reduction concerns.

DPPEA-FY03-16