

metroSTOR Webinar Summary and Transcript

Downtown Trash: Lessons from Real-World Operations

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metroSTOR Webinar Summary

Session Summary

This session brought together perspectives from several downtown districts operating in high-pressure environments, where waste management intersects with homelessness, service provision, and limited enforcement.

Despite the differences in geography and scale, a consistent theme emerged. The challenge is not simply how much waste exists, but how it behaves within the system. Waste is often generated, moved, accessed, and redistributed multiple times before it is finally removed. In many cases, teams are repeatedly collecting the same material after it has been taken out of bins or displaced.

What became clear throughout the discussion is that traditional approaches, focused purely on bin provision and collection frequency, are not sufficient on their own. Effective management requires a broader view of how waste flows through a place, and how people interact with it.

Key takeaways

One of the most important insights is that much of the litter found in downtown areas has already been disposed of once. It is placed in a bin or dumpster, then removed, disturbed, or scattered, and ultimately collected again. This repeated cycle fundamentally changes how the problem should be approached.

In this context, enclosed bins consistently outperform open ones. Where access to waste is unrestricted, bins quickly become points of redistribution rather than containment. By limiting access, enclosed designs reduce scavenging, dumping, and the spread of litter, even if they do not eliminate the problem entirely.

Another consistent finding is that behavior is influenced as much by perception as by infrastructure. Clean, well-maintained, and visibly managed spaces tend to encourage better use. When bins are clearly part of a cared-for environment, they are more likely to be used correctly.

The role of recycling also came under scrutiny. In high-pressure environments, contamination is often so significant that recycling systems fail to deliver meaningful outcomes. Many districts are now prioritizing general waste management first, with the option to reintroduce recycling later in more controlled settings.

It also became clear that adding more bins is not, in itself, a solution. Poor placement often leads to overflow, misuse, and increased servicing demands. A smaller number of well-placed, well-managed bins is typically more effective than widespread distribution without strategy.

Operationally, the work extends far beyond emptying containers. Teams are responsible for maintaining the wider public realm, including litter removal, graffiti cleaning, pressure washing, and responding to daily issues as they arise. Bins are only one part of a much larger system.

Another key issue is efficiency. Many operations are based on fixed routines rather than actual need, leading to unnecessary collections and wasted effort. Improving visibility of how bins are used, and adjusting accordingly, can significantly reduce resource use.

The discussion also highlighted that a substantial proportion of waste originates from sources outside the immediate control of waste teams. Service providers, food distribution, and businesses misusing public infrastructure all contribute to the problem. Without addressing these inputs, improvements will be limited.

Finally, enforcement is often constrained by legal or political realities. As a result, successful approaches tend to rely more on engagement, influence, and system design than on formal enforcement mechanisms.

Across all examples, the most effective programs followed a similar path. They began with small pilots, focused on observing real changes in behavior, refined their operations, and then scaled gradually. Attempts to implement large-scale solutions without this learning process were far less successful.

Final thought

The most important conclusion is that this is not simply a matter of bins or collection. It is about understanding and managing the system in which waste is created, accessed, and redistributed. Districts that recognize and address this broader system are the ones that make meaningful progress.

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metroSTOR Webinar Transcript

Nigel Deacon

So thanks, everyone, for joining our webinar on downtown trash. I think this is going to be a really exciting session and there's obviously lots of interest, which is great to see.

In putting this session together, one of the things that often came up is that downtown trash is a real challenge due to the challenges around homelessness and lots of other factors, which we're going to hear about. I'm looking forward to hearing lived experience from our panelists today. I'd like to thank Devin, Alex, and Jim for joining us and sharing their thoughts and experience on this subject.

Most of you will know by now that I don't like doing long introductions, but we're going to hear more about the challenges they encounter, how they've addressed them, and the problems they've come up against. We'll also hear from the audience on the challenges you might want to pose and the experience you want to share. So, I'm looking forward to a great session.

With that, I'm going to move forward to Devin. Devin, please tell us about your experience in Sacramento.

Devin Strecker

Yeah, thank you, Nigel. I'm Devin Strecker, Executive Director of the River District here in Sacramento. We are one of five PBIDs in the downtown area, and I started here in 2022. To give you a little history of how we got to where we are, the River District is essentially the north end of downtown Sacramento.

Obviously, we're going to be talking trash here today. We are bounded on the north side by the American River and on the west side by the Sacramento River. Over time, the course of the American River changed the way it flowed to meet the Sacramento River.

Initially, this area on the north end of downtown was considered a swamp or wasteland, so it was undevelopable until they built a railroad berm in the late 1800s, when the first transcontinental railroad came to Sacramento. Right under the word "railroad" on the map were our rail yards. So, we were separated from downtown Sacramento by the rail yards and this berm.

Once the berm was built, the area could be developed. It became home to warehouses and distribution-type businesses that utilized the railroad and rivers for shipping. The city also located its incinerator there, so we have a long history of our district being where trash goes.

In the 1950s and 60s, as shipping and warehouse businesses moved out to the suburbs and overseas, the city began locating social services and homeless shelters in our district because we were somewhat isolated by the railroad and the rivers. We also had an old landfill on the east end of the district, so we became a bit "out of sight, out of mind."

To this day, we still have the highest concentration of shelter beds in the district - almost 700 beds within a one-square-mile area. These green triangles represent where we currently have large homeless shelters.

We also have social services - typically open from around 8 AM to 3-5 PM - serving the unhoused population, including mental health services and food kitchens. Because of this, we have a large concentration of unhoused people camping in our district.

During COVID, things really came to a head with shelter-in-place orders. We had hundreds, if not thousands, of people camping on our streets, and it became very difficult to manage the trash left in the streets and curbs.

Because of our isolation, we also saw a lot of illegal dumping - people unloading couches, trash, and construction materials. This image shows B Street, kind of the Skid Row of Sacramento, near Loaves and Fishes, the largest social service provider. They are fully donation-funded, so they don't have the same restrictions as government-funded organizations. They provide food, tents, and survival gear for people living on the streets.

We're known as America's farm-to-fork capital, but unfortunately that's often obscured by tents and encampments. For better or worse, this is what the River District has become known for - the unhoused population and the associated trash.

This is another view of a typical street. I do want to give the City of Sacramento credit - they've been very aggressive in recent years in trying to clean this up. For example, this street was cleared about six months ago and has remained that way. But this reflects what we were dealing with from roughly 2020 through 2024.

We were fortunate to receive a grant from the city to purchase trash cans, giving people somewhere to put their waste. That grant came in around 2021; I joined in 2022.

Our unhoused population is very embedded and knows what they can and can't do. This example shows what can happen when people become emboldened in the public realm - a swimming pool hooked up to city water. The woman in the photo is flipping off the camera. This was just before I arrived.

One challenge - I do want to say we have a beautiful district. We're converting old properties into residential communities. For example, Mirasol Village has just under 500 mixed-income apartments, with a central park where we do programming.

As part of the grant, one stipulation made things difficult: the city did not want trash cans installed on sidewalks due to space constraints, accessibility concerns, and liability issues. So we had to find private property owners willing to host them.

We created MOUs with each property owner, agreeing to maintain, empty, repair, or remove the units as needed. Initially, three property owners agreed. In February 2025, working with metroSTOR and our public spaces team, we installed the first three units.

One was a dual litter/recycling unit; the other two were litter-only. It was important to us that they were enclosed, so people couldn't dig through them.

The units have a top hatch - either hand-operated or foot-pedal activated. Once trash is deposited, it drops into a basket that can't be accessed from above. We monitored them after installation and, thankfully, had no major issues. No vandalism or graffiti. One attempted fire didn't cause damage.

After a few months, we used remaining grant funds to install seven more units. Our team checks them every other day - some daily, depending on usage. For example, the one near McDonald's requires daily servicing.

They're simple to maintain - no mechanical or electrical components. Just unlock, remove the basket, empty, reline, and close.

We also wanted something that looked good. We considered more utilitarian or even bear-proof bins, but they weren't visually appealing. These units are branded, wrapped, and include a QR code. They send a signal that someone cares about the neighborhood, which influences behavior.

Our next step is to offer property owners the opportunity to purchase their own units. Initially, no one wanted them; now there's strong interest.

We're also looking at improving dumpster security, as much of the waste we collect has already been discarded once and then pulled back out. So securing dumpsters is the next piece, alongside recycling and compost considerations.

That's the overview - we've been very happy with the program and hope to expand it.

Nigel Deacon

Terrific. Really interesting, Devin. Thank you for that. There'll be plenty of space for Q&A a bit later on. I look forward to people's thoughts around that, but we'll move straight on to Alex.

Alex Ludlum

Thank you. I am Alex Ludlum, Executive Director of Soma West Community Benefit District in San Francisco. If you're not familiar with San Francisco's geography, Soma West borders Yerba Buena, where our convention center is, and the Tenderloin, which is well known as the epicenter of disorder downtown in San Francisco.

So, we're within three blocks of the open-air drug markets that continue to operate, and almost everything we do is related to dealing with that.

I have a somewhat unique perspective. I'm a neighborhood resident and came into my staff position from the volunteer board. Prior to that, I was on the citizen committee that led the campaign to get us formed. So, I can say quite explicitly from the outset that it was a political project, in response to our neighborhood being treated as a containment zone for the city's ills. And that is still explicitly the view of residents and businesses here.

We've been able to do a lot, but our board members joke that our internal name for Soma West is "the Trash Club", because that's the majority of what we do. In the 2025 calendar year, we picked up 828,000 pounds of trash.

We run teams of 11 ambassadors, seven days a week. Installing trash cans has done a lot to relieve general blight. We installed 53, and we're currently transitioning our first set, which were made out of plastic and were being destroyed at a rate of about 17 a year. So, we're very excited to be moving to metal cans, which we're slowly rolling out.

As far as long-term systemic changes, we've been focused on policy solutions, which frankly are not trash-related. They're more police matters, and also involve other city departments - the Department of Public Health and the Homeless Services Department - which have been a source of much of the disorder in San Francisco.

BIDs in California are prohibited from engaging in political activity, so we've encouraged our residents to form a neighborhood association. That's been active for the past year and has really changed the dynamic. We've secured more police presence, had station boundaries adjusted, and are in constant communication with the Department of Emergency Management and the police regarding hotspots and deployment.

Because, ultimately, all this disorder is the result of daily policy decisions, that's where we're focusing our efforts for long-term change - while we continue dealing with the day-to-day realities.

Thank you.

Nigel Deacon

Thank you, Alex. Some real challenges there, and it's great to learn more about how you're addressing them. So next, we move on to Jim.

Jim Leether

Good afternoon, everybody - or good morning, depending on where you are. My name is Jim Leether. I'm the Senior Manager of Environmental Services for the City of Windsor in Ontario, Canada.

For those trying to place us, we're about five minutes south of Detroit, Michigan, and about a three-hour drive from Toronto.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak. I oversee all of Windsor's waste management operations, from residential collection to commercial recycling, and our public litter bins.

Windsor is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in Canada, with over 200 years of settlement. We have both historic and modern areas. Like Detroit, we're heavily tied to the automotive sector, so we experience similar economic cycles. It's a very blue-collar city of about 250,000 people, with a regional population closer to 500,000.

At any given time, about 9,000 people are on waiting lists for social housing or assisted living. Our last homelessness census identified around 670–680 individuals, heavily concentrated in the downtown core.

We have business improvement areas - clusters of businesses organized locally - and I'd estimate that 95% of people experiencing homelessness are located within the downtown BIA. That's also where shelters and services are concentrated.

We conducted a litter bin inventory around 2022–2023 - the first in over a decade - and found roughly 900 bins in rights-of-way and another 800–900 in parks. About 90% were in disrepair, with damaged or missing locks.

Around that time, our mayor launched the Strengthen the Core program, aimed at improving downtown conditions. It brought together multiple departments - public works, social services, police, and outreach teams.

From our perspective, the goal was to raise cleanliness standards. Our existing open-top bins were being accessed, emptied, and scattered - especially given the winds from the Detroit River and surrounding lakes.

We were dealing with illegal dumping, dumpster diving, and misuse by local businesses. So, we set out to identify bins that would reduce access, minimize vandalism, and improve aesthetics.

Downtown hosts major events - markets, marathons, fireworks - that attract up to 100,000 people, so effective waste management is critical.

We introduced around 35–45 enclosed bins. At our launch event, while taking photos, we had people nearby overturning existing bins - so the issue was immediate and visible.

After installation, we saw noticeable improvements within 24 hours. There's been minor graffiti and one attempted fire, but no break-ins.

We service the area six nights a week, and bins are consistently full. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, though we did receive criticism - some people felt we were taking away access to food scraps. While I sympathize, our role is waste management, not solving broader social issues.

Recycling was another challenge. Our audits showed heavy contamination, so we've temporarily stepped back from recycling to focus on general waste management before reintroducing it properly.

The success has driven demand - other BIAs are now seeking to adopt similar bins and even contribute funding.

Operationally, we've had to shift mindset - slowing down, maintaining bins properly, and focusing on quality. Staff have embraced this, and it's become part of our culture.

Survey feedback from the downtown BIA has been overwhelmingly positive, and we're reporting back to council soon.

There's still work to do - needle waste remains an issue - but overall, it's been a strong success.

Nigel Deacon

Fantastic. Thank you, Jim. Really appreciate that.

So, we're going to start moving towards our Q&A. Please feel free to put any more thoughts or questions in the chat, but I'm going to kick off with a few thoughts.

Alex, if you will, tell us a bit about the work that your team does on waste collection as a whole and what their day looks like. Have you seen improvements or savings from moving towards enclosed containers as opposed to open ones?

Alex Ludlum

I actually can't speak to that change, Nigel, because we didn't replace existing city cans with enclosed cans. Back in the early 2000s, when Gavin Newsom was mayor, our Public Works Department determined they couldn't service our neighborhood's public trash cans in a timely manner, so they removed them.

So, across 107 blocks, when this BID was formed, there were 12 trash cans when we were first funded. All the enclosed cans we've installed are new, so there's no baseline for comparison.

But to your broader point, I think Devin mentioned that much of the trash he collects has already been collected once. We definitely see that. It's one of the reasons our plastic cans break so often - people tamper with them to get at what's inside, and in doing so, they end up scattering everything.

We do move the cans around, and we've found that having cans present absolutely reduces street litter - until people get inside them and it all ends up back out again.

Nigel Deacon

That's very helpful background - thank you.

A more general question: how does this align with what businesses - your members - and the public, including the political side, expect from your organizations in terms of a clean and safe environment? Devin, what are your thoughts?

Devin Strecker

Clean and safe is obviously the foundation of what we do. Given the scale of challenges we face, our property owners have been really encouraged by the units, because they're such a visible representation of the work our team is doing.

We get comments like, "The district looks so much better than it used to." We track the amount of litter we collect, and it continues to increase year on year, even after installing the units. But I think they've made things easier operationally, because more waste is now going into the bins rather than being scattered.

Nigel Deacon

Excellent. I was particularly interested in the point about accusations that we might be depriving people of a food source - or even income, for example from canning schemes in places like California where there are deposit refunds.

It can be quite an emotive issue. Would anyone like to expand on that? Alex?

Alex Ludlum

Yeah. Small businesses and residents in our neighborhood assume the police will do nothing for them. They assume Public Works will do nothing for them, and they look to us as the only organization that will respond.

In San Francisco, there's legislation stating that when a BID is formed, the city can't reduce services. But the workaround is that baseline services are effectively zero. So, any cleaning you see isn't guaranteed baseline service.

So, people are correct in expecting no routine cleaning from the city.

Our operations are entirely response-based. Despite that, we still get complaints from homeless advocates - for example about our no-loitering signage. It becomes a bit of a dance with city regulators. They raise complaints, I push back, and eventually they move on.

Nigel Deacon

That's a pretty tough environment. And it does vary city by city in terms of the support you get from partners - those that should be partners.

Alex Ludlum

To be fair, my experience isn't representative of all of San Francisco. I'd say 90% of neighborhoods are beautiful and well-functioning. I just happen to be in a part of downtown that absorbs a lot of the city's issues.

Devin Strecker

Yeah, and I'd add that while we're a city of about half a million people, and I do get frustrated at times - particularly with how hands-off the city can be regarding the unhoused population - we've also had strong support in other areas.

Some departments are easier to work with than others. We've had great success working with the Office of Economic Development and Innovation, because they clearly see the link between economic development and the city's appearance. That's where our grant funding came from, including the funding for these litter units.

Jim Leether

Yeah, I'll focus on funding there. As I mentioned earlier, we created the Strengthen the Core group, which includes social services, police, fire, and our Public Works Environmental branch. The mayor and council allocated several million dollars specifically for downtown improvement - not redevelopment.

That includes additional policing and a security system - what we call the green camera system - based on something Detroit has used successfully.

In terms of funding, we can bring forward proposals to council. Given my role overseeing all waste operations, I manage multiple budgets and can make the case to shift funding toward projects like this - particularly ones that are politically or publicly sensitive.

Funding isn't unlimited, of course. Every decision comes with trade-offs. But we've been successful, and we're now moving towards a partnership model, where BIAs contribute funding alongside the city.

Nigel Deacon

Excellent. Thank you.

Let's talk lessons learned. Are there things you tried that you wouldn't do again? Devin?

Devin Strecker

The main one is recycling. We initially installed a recycling unit, but shortly after, we received an exemption from the city - we don't have to recycle because we're collecting street waste, which is almost always contaminated. The same applies to organics.

So, while the recycling unit looks good and sends the right message, operationally we don't really need it. We're able to process what we collect through existing systems elsewhere.

Also, as mentioned earlier, some people look for recyclables as a source of income, which complicates things. So, we've shifted focus to standard litter units.

Alex Ludlum

One challenge for us is that we have a lot of highway on- and off-ramps, and Caltrans is usually our worst landlord.

We spent a year negotiating access to clean those areas, which seemed like a win at the time. But now that we're responsible for them, they've become a major operational burden, as they're prime encampment locations.

So, it wasn't a bad decision, but it turned into a much bigger long-term commitment than expected.

Jim Leether

A couple of lessons - and maybe a philosophy.

Quick fixes - what I'd call band-aids - added up over time. We'd respond to complaints or political pressure by placing bins reactively, without a clear strategy, and it often made things worse.

Having a clear standard and plan is critical. You need to understand what you're trying to achieve.

Recycling was another big lesson. We were responding to public demand, but contamination levels were so high that it became pointless. I call it “wish-cycling”- hoping something is recyclable when it isn't.

So, we've focused on getting general waste management right first.

From a philosophy standpoint: don't be afraid to take risks. These problems won't be solved overnight. Our leadership understands that small wins build into larger success, and collaboration across departments has been key.

Nigel Deacon

Great points - thank you.

What about sensors for measuring fill levels? Jim, have you used those?

Jim Leether

Yes, we've been piloting sensors, including in your bins, Nigel - though I'm not trying to sell them here.

We partnered with Tellus and are testing them across different asset types. They're promising - some issues to resolve, but clear potential.

For example, we had 12 bins in a low-use area that would normally have been serviced over 700 times on schedule. With sensors, we only needed 13 visits.

They're not perfect - a pizza box can throw off readings - but the efficiency gains are significant.

Nigel Deacon

Interesting. And one final question - how do enclosed bins perform in extreme cold?

Jim Leether

No major issues. We experience rapid weather changes - snow, freezing rain, and temperatures down to -20°C - but the bins held up well.

Locks didn't freeze, mechanisms worked, and there were no significant maintenance issues. We raised them slightly to reduce salt exposure, and overall durability has been very good.

Nigel Deacon

That's great, Jim. Thank you.

We're close to time, so let's finish with one final thought. Devin - what's the key takeaway for others facing similar challenges?

Devin Strecker

Understand your specific conditions - your population and the type of waste you're dealing with.

In our case, foot traffic is primarily unhoused individuals, so durability and preventing access were key. If we had more typical pedestrian traffic, we might prioritize sensors and recycling differently.

For now, we've focused on what works for our environment.

Nigel Deacon

Excellent. Thanks, Devin.

Jeremy, do you want to come in with a final question?

Basurto, Jeremy

Thanks. I'm with the City of Portland - we have about 1,600 garbage cans. We've had issues with vandalism—around 50 lock repairs per month, plus graffiti and fire damage. One thing we do is refurbish bins = strip them down, recoat them, and reuse them.

Is that possible with this type of product?

Nigel Deacon

Yes, absolutely. The panels are riveted and can be replaced. The frame can be refinished, so a full refurbishment program is entirely feasible. The product is designed with that in mind.

Nigel Deacon

We're just about out of time, so we'll wrap up there. Please feel free to continue the discussion in the chat.

Huge thanks to our panelists - Devin, Alex, and Jim - and to everyone who joined.

A consistent theme today is that this isn't just about bins - it's about behavior, system design, and managing competing pressures.

Hopefully this has given you a clearer picture of what's happening on the ground and some practical ideas to take back to your own districts.

Thanks again, and enjoy the rest of your day.

Q&A from the Chat

Operational reality

The discussion and chat revealed that there is no single model for managing downtown waste, but there are clear patterns in how teams operate.

In smaller districts, services may be delivered by just a few people, often through contracted arrangements. In larger or more complex environments, teams can be significantly bigger and operate every day of the week. Regardless of size, the scope of work is rarely limited to bins alone. Teams are typically responsible for the overall condition of the public realm, including litter collection, graffiti removal, and cleaning of streets and sidewalks.

This reflects a broader shift in thinking, where waste management is seen as part of a continuous maintenance operation rather than a standalone service.

Hazardous waste and safety

Many districts continue to deal with hazardous waste, particularly syringes, although the scale and type of waste can vary between locations. A consistent operational approach is that only trained staff handle these materials. Volunteers or members of the public may identify and report them, but removal is restricted to those with

appropriate training and equipment.

In some areas, there are indications that the nature of drug-related waste is changing, but the need for careful handling remains.

The role of service providers

One of the most significant practical insights is the impact of service providers on waste generation. Food distribution and outreach activities, while essential, often produce large volumes of packaging and residual waste. This can accumulate quickly if not actively managed.

Several examples showed that engaging with the leadership or governance of these organizations, rather than only frontline staff, can lead to meaningful improvements. In many cases, decision-makers are not fully aware of the downstream impact of their operations.

Behavior change and incentives

Some districts have experimented with encouraging cleaner behavior through simple incentive-based approaches, such as providing bags and tools to support self-cleaning within encampments. These initiatives have shown positive results where implemented, but they are often dependent on short-term funding and can be difficult to sustain.

There is also ongoing interest in building stronger partnerships with community and grassroots organizations, although this requires continued effort and coordination.

Enforcement in practice

Formal enforcement options are frequently limited, and in some cases politically sensitive. As a result, many cities rely on more informal or indirect methods.

These include identifying misuse through waste audits, engaging directly with businesses or individuals, and applying social or reputational pressure where appropriate. While not always consistent, these approaches can be effective when applied persistently.

Recycling in real-world conditions

The experience shared in the discussion reinforces a common challenge: public recycling systems in high-pressure environments are often heavily contaminated. This reduces their effectiveness and can increase operational complexity.

As a result, several districts have simplified their approach, focusing on general waste management as a priority before considering the reintroduction of recycling.

Funding and delivery models

Funding for these programs typically comes from a combination of sources, including grants, municipal budgets, and contributions from local business groups or property owners.

A common approach is to begin with externally funded pilots, demonstrate clear results, and then expand through shared investment. This staged model helps build both confidence and support.

Operational efficiency and technology

One of the more striking insights relates to efficiency. In many cases, bins are serviced far more frequently than necessary due to fixed schedules rather than actual demand.

Where sensor technology has been introduced, it has demonstrated the potential to significantly reduce unnecessary collections. While not without limitations, these tools can provide valuable data to support more targeted operations.

Asset durability and lifecycle

There is growing emphasis on using infrastructure that is both durable and repairable. In challenging environments, bins are exposed to heavy use, vandalism, and weather conditions, so longevity is critical.

The ability to refurbish or repair units, rather than replace them entirely, is increasingly seen as both a cost and sustainability advantage.

Closing observation

Perhaps the most useful takeaway from the discussion is a shift in perspective.

The work is no longer simply about collecting waste. It is about understanding how waste enters, moves through, and exits a place, and designing operations around that reality.

Districts that adopt this broader, system-based view are better positioned to reduce waste, improve efficiency, and create cleaner, more manageable environments.

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