

metroSTOR Webinar Summary and Transcript

Rethinking Downtown Commercial Waste Management

06.25.26

Summary page **2**

Transcript pages **4-12**

Catch up on all our previous Webinars [here](#)

1 860 327 8294
enquiries@metrostor.us
metrostor.us

1 of 12

metroSTOR Webinar Summary

Session Summary

This webinar brought together two very practical perspectives: Suki Janssen on the realities of running a demanding downtown waste service, and Gerard Brown on the sanitation and containment conditions that allow rodent problems to persist.

Taken together, the discussion made a clear point: recurring downtown waste problems are rarely just about collection. More often, they reflect a combination of limited space, difficult servicing conditions, weak containment, shared use, and too many opportunities for misuse.

Why downtown waste is hard to manage

Nigel set out four pressures that tend to shape downtown waste performance: high expectations around cleanliness, safety, appearance and diversion; limited space for waste operations; the need to serve multiple authorized users; and the need to prevent unauthorized use, whether from illegal dumping, scavenging, rodents, or people using other businesses' containers.

That framing shifted the conversation away from the idea that downtown waste is mainly a collection issue. In practice, it is often just as much a control, containment and infrastructure issue.

What Athens shows in practice

Suki Janssen's presentation illustrated what those pressures look like on the ground in Athens-Clarke County. Downtown Athens combines a very high concentration of bars, restaurants, residents and other businesses in a compact area, with limited alley space and a heavy concentration of activity at night. Around 78 tons of trash and recycling are removed daily, much of it in a narrow overnight window before the next business day begins.

The older bag system created a familiar set of problems: heavy bags, broken glass, leaking waste, odors, staining, vectors, poor appearance and real safety risks for staff and the public. It was also labor-intensive and costly to manage.

What better containment improved

Athens' eco-station pilot points to the value of more secure and better organized containment. Suki reported less use of pedestrian litter bins for personal trash, fewer bags on curbs, fewer vectors, less staining and odor, less contamination in recyclables, and less scavenging where eco-stations were introduced.

That is useful because it shows how one infrastructure change can help with several problems at once, rather than treating cleanliness, safety, recycling quality and street appearance as separate issues.

What the pilot taught

The Athens pilot also made clear that secure systems still have to be workable day to day. App-only access did not suit every business, especially where managers did not want staff using phones during shifts. Adding keypads made the system easier to use while retaining control and usage data.

The pilot also highlighted the need to design around actual waste behavior. Heavy nightlife bags did not work well with top-hatch loading, which led to a redesign toward side loading. Businesses also wanted a dedicated cardboard slot, reinforcing the point that systems need to reflect the real materials and workflows on site.

Rodents and food access

Gerard Brown's contribution brought the sanitation side into sharp focus. His main point was that rats thrive where food is easy to reach, and that long-term rodent reduction depends less on treatment alone than on denying access to food waste in the first place.

That is why waste containment matters so much. Open bags, poorly managed dumpsters, lids left ajar and exposed food waste all create predictable feeding opportunities. Better containment does not solve everything on its own, but it changes the conditions that allow rodent pressure to persist.

A useful reality check on plastic carts

Gerard's confirmed that plastic carts are not rodent proof. They may be described that way, but rats can gnaw through plastic, especially where lids are not fully shut or where food waste provides enough incentive. More secure enclosed systems, and particularly metal-based containment, offer a more reliable barrier.

Main takeaway

Probably the most useful takeaway from the session is that downtown waste and rodent problems are often designed into the system. Where containment is stronger, access is better controlled, and the system is designed around real operating conditions, performance tends to improve.

Catch up on all our previous Webinars [here](#)

1 860 327 8294
enquiries@metrostor.us
metrostor.us

metroSTOR Webinar **Transcript**

Nigel Deacon

Hi everyone, and thanks for joining us. We appreciate you taking the time to be here.

I'm Nigel Deacon from metroSTOR, and I'm joined today by two guest speakers, Suki Janssen and Gerard Brown.

Before we get into the discussion, I want to take a moment to set out why downtown commercial waste is often so difficult to manage in practice - there are really four interacting factors:

First, there are the expectations around downtown quality, quite rightly, not just in terms of cleanliness, safety, and appearance, but also in terms of proper waste separation and diversion performance from businesses operating in those areas.

Second, this is compounded by very limited space for waste management. Many cities have no alleyways at all, and even where they do, they are often poorly suited to servicing and containment in today's conditions.

Third, these systems usually need to work for multiple authorized users: businesses, staff, and haulers, all using the same area in different ways at different times.

Fourth, they also need to resist unauthorized use, whether that means illegal dumping, scavenging, rodent activity, people using other businesses' containers, or other forms of misuse.

That combination of tensions is what makes downtown waste so difficult. What often looks like a collection problem is actually a control problem, a space problem, or an infrastructure problem that needs to be addressed.

So the aim of today's conversation is to look at some of the infrastructure patterns that shape performance in real conditions, and to explore what downtown commercial waste systems need to look like if they are going to work reliably in practice.

I'm delighted to be joined today by Suki Janssen, Solid Waste Director for Athens-Clarke County, Georgia, who brings direct experience of downtown management and the day-to-day realities of keeping commercial environments clean and safe.

We're also joined by Gerard Brown, a nationally recognized rodent control and environmental public health expert. His work has consistently highlighted the relationship between sanitation, food access, containment, and long-term rodent pressure in urban environments.

So with that, let's get into it - Suki, would you like to introduce yourself and take us through your presentation?

Suki Janssen

Hi, I'm Suki Janssen. I'm the Solid Waste Director in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia. I've been with the Solid Waste Department for over 23 years now, and about half that time has been as director.

Here in Athens, our Solid Waste Department has more than 70 employees spread across several facilities. We have a landfill, a contractual MRF, a CHaRM facility for hard-to-recycle materials, and educators. Our largest division, though, is collections. We collect residentially and commercially, and for today's purposes we are effectively the only hauler in our central business district and we operate 24/7 in the downtown district.

A little more about Athens: I've been here since 1989 and I love the area. We have around 129,000 residents, and a large share of them are University of Georgia students. Around 43,000 students call Athens home for a good part of the year.

That leads to the next point. Downtown Athens has more than 80 bars or bar-and-restaurant combinations, packed into roughly a one-square-mile area. If you Google it, you'll sometimes see Athens described as having one of the highest densities of bars per capita in the U.S. I'm not sure who is celebrating that apart from the bar owners. From a sanitation point of view, it presents a lot of challenges.

In addition to the bars and restaurants, there are around 1,500 residential units in the downtown district. In terms of business mix, food, beverage, and nightlife make up around 40-45%. Retail is around 25-30%. Services such as attorneys, doctors' offices, and other professional businesses make up 10-15%. Government buildings, hospitality, and mixed use make up the balance.

That is what our downtown looks like. We have very limited alleyways, and most of the alleyways we do have are so narrow that you can barely fit a person through them. Many are privately owned and not usable by the municipality.

On average, about 78 tons of trash and recycling are removed from downtown every day by our department. Around two-thirds of that is removed at night. By far our busiest time is from about 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. Our bars stay open until around 2 a.m., and after that we are competing with Uber, Lyft, buses, and personal vehicles as thousands of people leave downtown. We also have to get everything cleared before 6 or 7 in the morning, before breakfast service and morning business activity begin.

I was very pleased to come across metroSTOR at a SWANA event. I've been in this field for a long time. Before Athens, I worked for Keep Georgia Beautiful, and before that my father worked for Novelis, so recycling and trash are very much in my veins. When I go into a vendor area, I tend to know what I'm looking for. metroSTOR caught my attention because for years we've wanted to change how we operate downtown.

Our Existing Downtown System

Historically, bags and bins have defined how we collect garbage in the downtown district.

Customers in the central business district have to use Athens-Clarke County unless they have their own compactor or private dumpster in a private area, such as a subgrade location or private parking structure. Everyone else who does not have access to their own private setup relies on us for trash and recycling pickup.

We operate essentially 24/7 downtown. Our litter team comes in during the morning, our second shift works from 2 p.m. to 10 p.m., and our night shift continues pickup through the late evening and early morning. That system is still partly in place, but we are trying to move away from it.

It is not a one-size-fits-all situation in downtown Athens, and from what I see in other U.S. downtowns, many places face the same complications we do. In some ways, Athens has an even tougher challenge because we are dealing with a very high volume of material in a relatively small area.

Why We Wanted to Change the Method

The main reason we wanted to change was staff safety. Heavy bags are a real problem. People have no idea what 50 pounds feels like, and they often use bags that are not designed for the load they put into them. We have sold trash and recycling bags for years, which is frankly ridiculous, but people would buy a thin kitchen bag and fill it with 50 pounds of bar glass, or bundle several together and expect our crews to lift them off the ground.

Sharp and broken objects sticking out of bags are another serious issue. We recently had a long-term employee injured because he did not see a piece of glass protruding from a bag. When a bag is extremely heavy, you naturally pull it closer to your body to lift it. He ended up with a serious calf injury, 15 stitches, and he is still recovering.

These problems affect not just our staff but also downtown visitors. At night, thousands of people are out in the district. In summer, many end up barefoot after taking off high heels or uncomfortable shoes, and we have seen many foot injuries from broken glass escaping from bags.

Downtown is also the only place where we still use rear-load compactor trucks and sometimes require staff to be on the back step. As everyone on this call knows, that contributes to solid waste remaining one of the most dangerous industries in the country.

There are other issues too. We have had instances where people ripped open bags to get at glass and use it as a weapon. Bags also leak. Grease and liquids stain pavements and create lingering odors. Vectors are drawn to these conditions. And from a basic aesthetics point of view, bags on the curb are simply unsightly.

It is also a more expensive way to operate. It requires more staff, more trucks, and continuous service to manage all the trash and recycling.

Then there is football season. During six or seven home games each year, our population more than quadruples. The police department brings in officers from surrounding jurisdictions to help manage traffic. So we are dealing not just with routine volume but also with extreme peaks.

All of this is why we wanted to change the method.

What We Started to Do

We are still in a pilot phase. At one stage, we had a commissioner who was not keen to change how things were done downtown. So instead of leading with the term “dumpster enclosure,” we came up with a different name internally: “eco stations.”

These are essentially enclosed waste stations that contain roll-carts or dumpsters for trash, recycling, and compost. That is the term we use internally, and that is what I will call them from this point onward.

At the moment, we are piloting six eco stations in total: three for trash and three for recycling, placed on three different streets. We pair landfill and recycling containers together because if you separate them, people tend to use them incorrectly. In our view, trash and recycling bins work better as a pair.

The units initially launched with app-based access. We thought that would work well, especially with younger users. The app lets us see who is using the stations, how often they are being accessed, and it also gives users prompts about what goes where.

We use the sides of the stations as communication space as well, including anti-littering messages and promotion for our CHaRM facility.

The street side is for staff access. The sidewalk side is for residents and selected commercial users. Inside the eco station, there are wheeled plastic dumpsters. We chose plastic because it is quieter than metal, and noise matters when you are operating in a downtown district around the clock.

Eco-Station Successes

We have seen several encouraging results.

There is much less use of our pedestrian litter bins for personal trash, especially by downtown residents. That was a major issue before the eco stations were introduced, and it has now almost disappeared in those areas.

We have fewer bags on curbs. They are not gone entirely because we are still in pilot mode, but there are fewer.

We have seen fewer vectors in the areas where the stations are in use.

Clayton Street, our busiest downtown street and the one with the highest concentration of bars, has been a major focus of the pilot. If we can make this work there, we feel we can probably make it work anywhere downtown.

Anecdotally, we have seen less staining on newly renovated sidewalks, fewer odors, and less contamination in the recycling stream, though we do not yet have the full data.

We also have a sizeable unhoused population in the downtown district. When bags were left on curbs, they were often scavenged through, ripped open, and spread around. We have seen less of that where the eco stations are in place. That makes the area cleaner and safer, both for the unhoused population and for our crews.

Eco-Station Lessons Learned

We have also learned a lot.

The first lesson was that app-only access was too limiting. Staff may like phones, but some business owners and managers do not want employees using them while working. They told us clearly that they did not like an access system that relied entirely on phones. So we kept the app, because it gives us useful back-end data, but we added keypads for businesses that do not want their staff using phones at the station.

The second lesson was about bag weight. The top hatch worked fine for lighter daytime waste, but not for the heavy nighttime bags generated by bars. Lifting a heavy bag while also holding a top door open is awkward and impractical.

So metroSTOR is redesigning the units for us. Instead of a top hatch, the next version will have side-opening access more like a traditional dumpster. That should make it much easier for users handling heavy bags.

We also found that businesses wanted a dedicated cardboard slot. So we are working on that too. Cardboard that is not flattened wastes valuable capacity and forces more frequent servicing, so this is an important improvement.

We are still working through a few other details, including uneven fill in the bins and the operational implications of door props and access design.

Another point worth mentioning is durability. In Athens, if you put out something interesting, especially anything with a University of Georgia logo on it, it may disappear. Students also stand on just about anything they can. We have seen them standing on the eco stations during major downtown events. It is not ideal and it is not safe, but it has shown us that the units are durable.

So overall, the lessons learned have been constructive. metroSTOR has been a strong partner in helping us work through them so we can refine the design and roll the system out more widely.

Future Eco-Station

We are now working with a local wildlife artist, Will Eskridge, to add artwork to the stations before the next football season. In Athens, art and music matter, and we want these stations to feel like a thoughtful part of the downtown environment rather than just another piece of utility infrastructure.

That's all I have for today.

Nigel Deacon

Fantastic. Thank you, Suki. I really appreciate that.

There are some questions in the chat, so let's turn to those.

Suki Janssen: Q&A

On ADA access: Yes, the side hatches will help make the containers ADA accessible. Because these stations were installed as a semi-permanent pilot, we did not pour a full concrete pad under them. We wanted to make sure the concept worked first. Athens also has a lot of slopes and uneven surfaces, so we had to use concrete to level the units and add a high-visibility metal plate to bridge the gap between the curb and the station.

We also installed bollards at the request of our transportation and public works department. If ADA access ever became a more significant issue, we had also considered a valet-type service because we have staff downtown consistently and are unlikely to get away from that entirely.

We are also adding smaller compost units that will work with keypad or app access for selected pilot users.

On service frequency: At the moment, the stations are mainly serviced daily, especially when students are in town. In the fall and spring, and around football and event periods, all units need daily service. In quieter periods such as winter and summer, once the system is rolled out further, we hope to move away from daily servicing.

We are not currently using sensors to detect fullness, although that is something we have discussed internally.

On cleaning: We have three full-time litter staff downtown. Two focus mainly on cups, bottles, and other litter. The third is responsible for the eco stations. He checks them every day, removes graffiti quickly, and cleans them at least weekly or as needed. He also blows out debris when the containers are emptied.

On whether bags go straight into the bins: Yes. The bags go directly into the dumpsters inside the enclosure. We removed the dumpster lids because the enclosure itself effectively serves that function.

On billing: We bill most downtown users through the water bill. Our collections division operates as an enterprise fund. Downtown is billed on what I would describe as a modified pay-as-you-throw system. Businesses that produce more, such as bars and restaurants, pay more than lighter generators such as retail stores.

On funding for litter staff: Our litter staff are city employees within the solid waste department. They are funded through our general fund services.

On whether rats can still access the stations: Rats are very determined. I have not seen them around the bins, but they are certainly downtown. Could they get into the eco stations? Possibly, though we have made it much more difficult than with bags or loose carts.

When the stations become permanent, we intend to install them flush to the ground on full concrete pads. That will close off the gap underneath and make access much harder.

So I would not claim they are fully rat proof, but they are certainly a major improvement.

Veronica Schlueter

The app gives us very useful data. For example, one bin on North Lumpkin Street has had 3,314 uses since installation. North Jackson Street is at 2,180, and North Hall Street is at 882, though that one may be lower because the unit was replaced at some point.

If needed, we can further break down usage by residents versus businesses, though that would take some additional analysis.

Nigel Deacon

Thank you, Suki, and thanks to everyone who submitted questions.

Let's now move to Gerard.

Gerard Brown

I'm Gerard Brown, President of The Rodent Man Consulting LLC. I'm speaking today about proper sanitation, waste containment, and rodent control.

A little about me: I've worked in environmental public health for more than 40 years, including over 25 years leading the District of Columbia Department of Health's Rodent and Vector Control Program.

Over that time we tried many different approaches: carbon monoxide, dry ice, birth control, and other methods. But the reality is that the most effective way to reduce rats is to reduce their access to food.

If rats have food, they produce healthy litters and multiply quickly. So the real answer is to think differently. If food waste is stored in containers rats cannot get into, they will go elsewhere. Reduce the food, and you reduce the rats.

Why Rodents Thrive in Urban Environments

In Washington, D.C., I often say that every resident or visitor comes within five feet of a rat at some point, whether they know it or not.

One of the first signs to look for is rat burrows. Many people do not recognize them. Rats live in the soil and are mostly active at night. You may be very close to them without seeing them.

Why do rats thrive in cities? The answer is simple: food. Not litter. Not paper. Food.

Too often food waste ends up in open litter cans, overflowing dumpsters, or plastic bags left out in the open. During the pandemic, changing living patterns made food even more available to rats.

In D.C., the law says you cannot put trash out in plastic bags alone. The bags must be in a proper container with a tight-fitting lid, because plastic bags are not rodent proof. Rats can chew right through them.

Rats also cause more than public health problems. They damage property. They chew wires, including vehicle wiring, and the cost of repairs can be significant.

Understanding Rat Behavior

The main urban rat we deal with is the Norway rat. Rats need the same three things we do: food, water, and shelter.

They can travel up to 150 feet to find food, but they would much rather have it close to where they live. If food is available nearby, they will settle in and create repeated travel paths, or “runways,” between the burrow and the food source.

Humans often provide everything they need, often without realizing it.

That is why integrated pest management matters. It is not only about poisons or rodenticides. It is about changing the environment: using enclosed containers, reducing access to food, installing wire mesh where appropriate, and taking practical preventative steps.

In fact, a D.C. council member recently introduced legislation for a pilot using enclosed containers in alleyways because people are starting to understand that if you want to deal with rats, you need to deal with the food source.

Recognizing Signs of Rodent Activity

You may see rats directly, but more often you will notice signs such as burrows, droppings, damaged food, or grease marks. Rats have greasy skin, and when they travel repeatedly along a wall, they leave visible rub marks. Those signs matter because they tell you rats are present even when you do not see them.

Education and Behavior Change

If there is one thing I want people to take away today, it is this: reducing food waste access is the key. That means changing how people think and behave.

In D.C., people often call 311 for rat help and then end up receiving a citation because they themselves are creating the conditions that support rats. In that sense, the citation is part of the education.

Each year, when reports come out ranking cities by rat complaints, Washington is usually near the top. That gives the city an opportunity to educate the public about proper storage of trash and food waste.

Are Plastic Carts Rodent Proof?

No. Vendors often say heavy-duty plastic carts or dumpsters are rodent proof, but that is not true. Rats can gnaw through plastic surprisingly quickly, especially if the lids are not closed tightly or if food waste inside gives them an incentive.

The issue is not that rats want to eat plastic. They are trying to get to the food. What is more effective is enclosed, clean, robust containment that denies access to food waste.

Metal Containers: The Gold Standard

The gold standard is properly enclosed trash. When containers are secure and the surrounding area is clean, you tend to see better results overall. Cleanliness itself can reinforce better public behaviour. If a place looks managed and controlled, people are less likely to misuse it.

Poor dumpster management creates ideal feeding opportunities for rats. Overflowing waste, exposed bags, broken lids, and poorly maintained containers all support rodent activity.

In D.C., the law technically requires metal dumpsters with metal tops, though enforcement has been inconsistent. But the principle remains sound: if you want to reduce rats, you need containment that they cannot chew through and access that stays closed.

Building a Sustainable Rodent Control Program

Compactors, enclosed cart storage, and trash sheds can all help. The point is to create barriers between rats and food waste.

Rodent control is not just about pest control teams. It is about people. It is about organizing, keeping areas clean, taking responsibility, and being proactive.

Even after retiring, when I saw a school area with overflowing trash, I did what I had always advised others to do: organize a cleanup. These problems do not solve themselves.

Rats are a public health risk, and reducing that risk takes a collective effort.

The most effective rodent control programs are not really pest control programs. They are sanitation, infrastructure, and community engagement programs.

Nigel Deacon

That was fantastic. Thank you, Gerard.

One point that really stood out to me was your slide on plastic carts, because we often hear the claim that carts stop rats, when in reality they often just move the issue around or delay it.

Do you want to say a bit more about that?

Gerard Brown

Yes. Heavy-duty plastic carts and totes are not rodent proof because they are not thick enough to stop rats gnawing through them. Rats can chew through them quite quickly, sometimes overnight.

If a lid is not fully closed, that gives them an easy starting point. But even if the lid is shut, they may still gnaw through the body of the container if food inside is attracting them.

So when people say heavy-duty plastic is rodent proof, that is simply not true.

Nigel Deacon

That takes me back to some work we did in Baltimore last year. There were commercial alleyways with very heavy infestation, and introducing simple metal cart enclosures made a very significant difference.

I'll share a case study link in the chat for anyone interested:

<https://metrostor.us/case-study/transforming-downtown-baltimore-one-alley-at-a-time/>

Gerard Brown

Yes, enclosing carts in that way is a good method too. It is the same principle as a trash shed: you are providing a stronger barrier between rats and the waste.

Nigel Deacon

Exactly. There is a range of solutions now: secure steel cart enclosures, secure steel lids for dumpsters, fully enclosed systems, and other variations.

<https://metrostor.us/products/mlid-system-retrofit-controlled-deposit-lid/>

<https://metrostor.us/products/mpod-system-controlled-deposit-fel-dumpster/>

We do not use these sessions to promote products, but it is useful to show examples of the kinds of solutions that are emerging and how they connect to the points Gerard has made.

I think we are probably at the end of the questions.

Thanks so much to everyone who joined us today. We really appreciate you taking the time.

We'll share the recording and slides over the next few days. And as always, if there are other topics you would like us to cover in future sessions, please let us know.

Thanks again to Suki and Gerard for all the work you put into this, and thanks to everyone who joined us.

Have a great rest of your day.

Catch up on all our previous Webinars [here](#)

1 860 327 8294
enquiries@metrostor.us
metrostor.us

12 of 12