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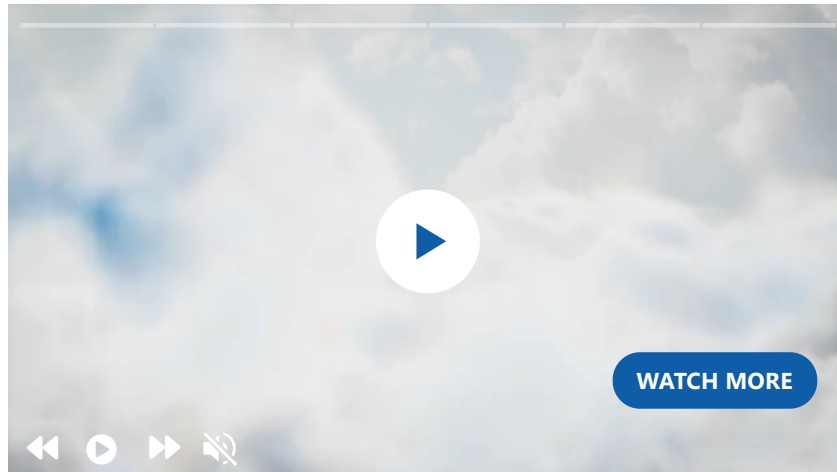
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Debrah Smul tried following Charlotte's new paper bag mandate, but she and her husband have encountered difficulties this fall.

"It's been a struggle to load up those paper bags," Smul told The Charlotte Observer. "They get wet, smell and fall apart."

Like other Charlotte residents, the Smuls bought plenty of paper bags and a reuseable container for their leaves and yard waste after the city banned plastic bags over the summer. Now, they're trying to figure out how to adapt to the new guidelines.

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"We've been watching around in our neighborhood and other places and kind of worried about them like everybody's doing something different now," Smul said. "Some people are doing paper bags and some people are doing plastic containers, so like they're unloading a lot of stuff into those trucks, and it's just very non-standard."

City officials announced the change in yard waste policy in May.

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The change went into effect on July 5, part of an effort to limit the [environmental problems created by plastic bags](#) — including more than 8 million tons of waste in the ocean every year and the emission of toxic and poisonous gases into the atmosphere, the Observer has reported.

To get their waste picked up, residents can use compostable paper bags or [personal reusable containers](#) that weight less than 75 pounds.

Paper bags are an environmentally friendly alternative because they're extracted from unbleached, recycled brown kraft paper, save natural resources and energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, according to the city.

The switch from plastic bags may be seamless for some residents, but for many, it could be an ongoing issue that could lead to a minimum \$150 fine from the city.

ONE ALTERNATIVE: LEAF BURRITO

The city's recommended products didn't work for the Smuls, so they looked elsewhere and found the Leaf Burrito online.

The [Leaf Burrito](#) is a reusable, mesh yard bag capable of holding grass clippings, leaves, weeds, hedge trimmings and more, inventor and company CEO Marc Mataya told the Observer. And it's made in Charlotte.

Mataya began Leaf Burrito in 2015 when he was throwing a big party at his home and had about 25 bags' worth of leaves in his front yard. With time running short, he got a large tarp, raked the leaves in it, rolled it up like a burrito and ran down the block to see if Solid Waste Service employees would pick it up.

The workers obliged and emptied the "burrito" into the truck, Mataya said. They told Mataya that they preferred doing it his way as opposed to opening multiple plastic bags, he said.

"Ding, ding, ding," Mataya said he thought after talking with the city crew. "We need a controlled tarp, manageable in size, ergonomic and has handles."

In 2016, after months of research and meetings, Mataya got a design patent. The city later approved the Leaf Burrito for curbside emptying.

The company has a shop on Scaleybark Road at South Boulevard, and business is doing so well, plans to expand to Ohio are on the horizon, said Mataya, an Ohio State University graduate.

"It's been great," Debrah Smul said about the 5-foot, \$79 bag. "We're buying another one because we have a lot leaves."

Marc Mataya demonstrates how to use a Leaf Burrito at the Leaf Burrito in Charlotte, NC, on Wednesday, September 29, 2021. The city earlier this year banned the use of plastic bags for yard waste, potentially making leaf removal more of a chore. Khadejeh Nikouyeh
KNIKOUYEH@CHARLOTTEOBSERVER.COM

OTHER LEAF REMOVAL OPTIONS

Residents who don't want to pay for a Leaf Burrito can pick up free paper bags at the city's Solid Waste Services office at 1105 Otts St., or at any of the [Mecklenburg County full-service recycling centers](#).

"City Solid Waste has also partnered with local home improvement stores to ensure there are an ample amount of reusable containers available for residents," Rodney

Jamison, director of Solid Waste Services, told the Observer.

The city department is planning an exchange event for mid-October, Jamison said. Residents can bring in plastic yard waste bags and exchange them for paper bags, he said. Containers will not be available, he said.

Paper bags and [reusable 32-gallon containers, which cost about \\$20-\\$30](#), also are available at discount, hardware and home improvement stores.

Residents with a litany of trees on their property should prepare their leaves as they did prior to the new mandate, Jamison said. They'll just have to remember to use paper bags or reusable containers that weigh no more than 75 pounds.

Those who don't want to abide by the new city rule can have their leaves picked up for varying prices by private lawn care companies. Leaf removal services can start at \$50, according to the home management site Thumbtack.

Residents also can compost the leaves, which websites like [Gardeners.com](#), say feed earthworms and beneficial microbes. They can also make an attractive mulch in flower gardens.

YARD WASTE PREP: THE 5-4-3-2-1 RULE

Jamison, the Solid Waste Services director, proposed a "5-4-3-2-1 rule" to help residents remember how to prepare their yard waste before pickup:

- **5:** Tree limbs should be no longer than 5 feet in length.
- **4:** Limbs and loose debris should be no larger than 4 inches in diameter.
- **3:** Each yard waste pile should be no higher than 3 feet and separated by type: leaves, limbs and loose debris. Piles should also be 3 feet from other objects.
- **2:** Yard waste piles should be 2 feet apart from each other.
- **1:** When yard waste is prepared properly, it makes for one easy collection for Solid Waste Services collection staff.

Unbagged loose debris, such as large branches and logs, will be collected, Jamison said. Loose debris should be prepared properly, and items should fit within the specified measurements, he said.

The city recommends residents place their yard waste at the curb by 6 a.m. on pickup days, and don't allow it to block the sidewalk or blow onto the street.

RECYCLING CENTER ACCEPT YARD WASTE

Residents can bring yard waste — in paper bags or reusable containers — to one of Mecklenburg County's four full-service recycling centers.

- Foxhole Recycling Center: 17131 Lancaster Highway, Charlotte
- North Mecklenburg Recycling Center: 12300 N. Statesville Road, Huntersville
- Hickory Grove Recycling Center: 8007 Pence Road, Charlotte

▪ Compost Central and Recycling Center: 140 Valleydale Road, Charlotte

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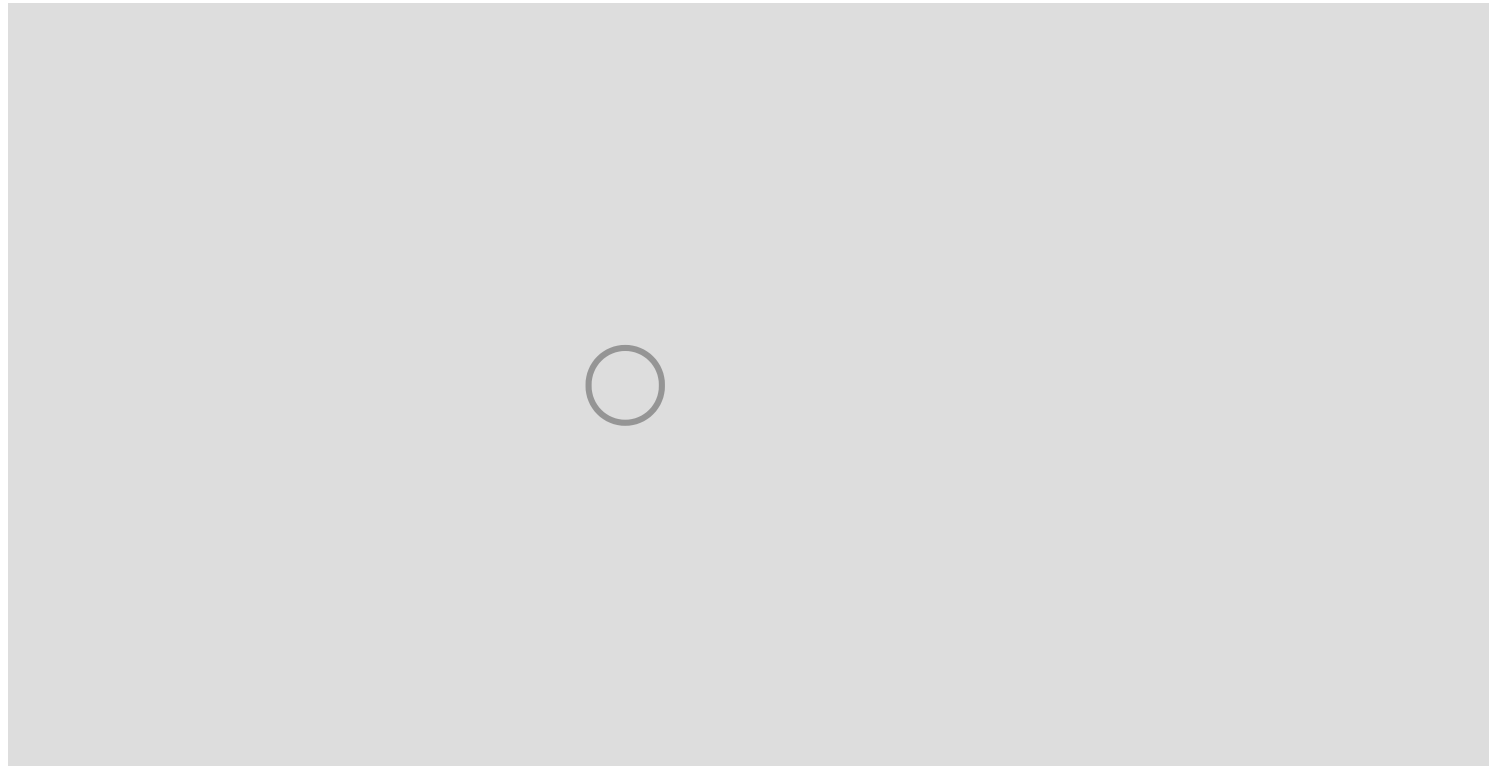
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Marc Mataya demonstrates how to use a Leaf Burrito at the Leaf Burrito in Charlotte, NC, on Wednesday, September 29, 2021. The city earlier this year banned the use of plastic bags for yard waste, potentially making leaf removal more of a chore. KHADEJEH NIKOUYEH
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Jonathan Limehouse is a breaking news reporter and covers all major happenings in the Charlotte area. He has covered a litany of other beats from public safety, education, public health and sports. He is a proud UNC Charlotte graduate and a Raleigh native.

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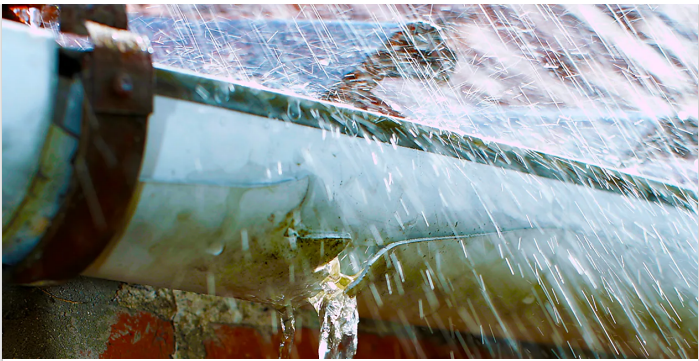
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