NC SWANA FALL CONFERENCE · 2026

Know Your Numbers.
Know Your Audience.
Know Your Outcomes.

The Solid Waste Leadership Playbook

Nine plays for building support for programs that deliver results

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WHY WE'RE HERE

Planning for an outcome yields greater success

Start with the end in mind: what leaders need to decide, and what residents should receive.

Why this matters to you

- Every service line competes for the same tax dollars
- Disposal capacity, fuel, labor and equipment costs keep shifting
- Decisions happen in public, shaped by residents' stories
- Contracts and programs lock in cost and service for years

What you will take away

Know your numbers
Cost per home by service line, and the assumptions behind it

Know your audience
One fact base, framed for residents, elected officials and staff

Know your outcomes
Define success first, then plan, measure and report against it

TODAY'S ROADMAP

01 The challenge → 02 Nine plays → 03 Apex field test → 04 Tools and discussion

OPENING CHALLENGE

Could you answer this tomorrow?

> *If your manager or commissioners asked what it costs to collect trash, recycling, bulky items and yard waste — each one separately — and what taxpayers receive for that investment, could you answer with confidence?*

Trash

$ ____ / home

cost, participation, outcome

Recycling

$ ____ / home

cost, participation, outcome

Bulky items

$ ____ / home

cost, participation, outcome

Yard waste

$ ____ / home

cost, participation, outcome

THE PLAYBOOK

Nine plays across the DMAIC cycle

DMAIC improves the program. A steady communication rhythm builds the support to fund and sustain it.

D DEFINE	M MEASURE	A ANALYZE	I IMPROVE	C CONTROL
01 Define the outcome **02 Frame the problem**	**03 Know your numbers** **04 Decode the rate**	**05 Test for equity** **06 Find the root cause**	**Field test:** **Town of Apex**	**07 Lock in results**

THROUGHOUT

08 Know your audience **09 Keep the rhythm**

Listen → Brief → Engage → Decide → Report back

Avoid the "surprise vote": bring leaders along before the formal ask.

PLAY 01 · DEFINE

Define the outcomes

A community cannot judge value until its leaders agree on what success looks like.

Quality service

Reliable, safe, convenient collection

Measure: Missed stops · resolution time

Community aesthetics

Clean streets and public spaces

Measure: Litter · illegal dumping · appearance

Sustainability

Measurable diversion and material quality

Measure: Participation · tons · contamination

Fiscal stewardship

Affordable, equitable cost recovery

Measure: Cost per home · fee and tax burden

ASK **Which of these matters most to our community — and what are we willing to pay for it?**

PLAY 02 · DEFINE

Start with the problem, not the preferred solution

Agree on the service gap, the stakeholders, the decision and the boundaries.

Operational work

- Write a one-sentence problem statement
- Capture resident and staff “voice of the customer”
- Define scope, ownership and success criteria
- Map who makes and influences the decision

Leadership communication

- Interview managers before building the proposal
- Surface policy priorities and constraints
- Ask: “What evidence would change your mind?”
- Publish a concise, one-page project charter

GATE **Do we agree on the problem, the sponsor, the scope and the goal before we move on?**

PLAY 03 · MEASURE

Know the true cost of each service line

One blended rate per home hides very different cost drivers.

Trash

Stops and frequency · route density · labor · disposal tip fees

Recycling

Participation · processing fees or revenue · contamination

Bulky items

Request volume · appointment model · labor hours · disposal mix

Yard waste

Seasonality · set-out rate · processing · equipment

BUILD THE FULLY LOADED COST

Collection + **Processing & disposal** + **Overhead** + **Capital & fleet** ÷ **Homes served** = **Cost per home, per service**

ASK — **Which service costs the most per home — and is it the one residents value most?**

PLAY 04 · MEASURE

Every “$ per home” rests on assumptions

Comparable prices require comparable scope, service levels, geography and risk.

Service design

- Weekly vs. every other week
- Cart size and collection method
- On-call vs. scheduled
- Staff program or privatize (outsource)?

Operating reality

- Homes per route-mile
- Density and drive time
- Fuel, maintenance and labor costs
- Fleet uptime

Downstream cost

- Tip fees and disposal mix
- Recycling processing terms
- Material contamination

Contract economics

- Fuel and labor escalators
- Capital and reserve fleet
- Performance standards

REMEMBER **The lowest price is not always the lowest total cost — or the best outcome.**

PLAY 05 · ANALYZE

Is each service equitable to the tax base?

Separate who has access, who participates, who benefits and who pays.

ILLUSTRATIVE MATH · HYPOTHETICAL YARD WASTE PROGRAM

$600,000 annual cost · 10,000 eligible homes
4,000 participating homes (40%)

$60
per eligible home

$150
per participating home

Participation rate = participating ÷ eligible households

Questions to answer

- What share of eligible homes uses the service?
- What is the cost per participating home vs. per eligible home?
- Who subsidizes whom — and is that intentional?
- Are fees, taxes and subsidies transparent?

Equity is a policy decision. Universal service can carry community-wide benefits; opt-in programs often cost more per participant.

ASK **Is low participation a price problem — or a design, convenience or awareness problem?**

PLAY 06 · ANALYZE

Separate symptoms from causes

Use evidence and field observation rather than the loudest anecdote.

ROOT-CAUSE TOOLBOX



Route and stop-level mapping



Pareto chart of complaint types



5 Whys and fishbone analysis



Ride-alongs and staff interviews



Cost-driver and equity review

Questions decision-makers will ask

- What changed — and where?
- Is it a process, education, asset or policy issue?
- Which drivers are within local control?
- Who benefits, and who bears added cost?
- What happens if we do nothing?
- How confident are we in the data?

REMEMBER **The goal is not to prove our original idea. It is to find the right intervention.**

PLAY 07 · CONTROL

Follow-through earns the next approval

Trust grows when results are visible and corrective action is predictable.



Owner

A named sponsor and a process owner who answers for results



Scorecard

A few stable, clearly defined KPIs tied to the agreed outcomes



Triggers

Thresholds that automatically prompt escalation and action



Review

Monthly operational and quarterly executive reviews

COMMIT **Report publicly what worked, what did not and what changes next.**

PLAY 08 · THROUGHOUT

One set of facts. Three conversations.

Consistent information does not require identical messages for every audience.

Taxpayers and residents

- What do I receive, and what will it cost?
- How do I participate or report a problem?
- What measurable benefit results?

Elected officials

- What outcome serves our constituents?
- What are the alternatives and trade-offs?
- Is this fiscally fair and defensible?

Staff and leadership

- What will change operationally?
- Who owns the work and the metrics?
- When and how do issues escalate?

ASK **What does each audience need to hear — and who is the right messenger?**

PLAY 09 · THROUGHOUT

Build a rhythm, not a reactive campaign

An illustrative starting cadence; adapt to local governance, public-meeting and records rules.

Cadence	Audience	Focus	Format
Weekly	Frontline teams and supervisors	Exceptions, safety, customer issues	Operations huddle
Monthly	Department and executive staff	KPI trends, risks, decisions needed	One-page scorecard
Quarterly	Manager and elected body	Outcomes, finances, policy choices	Executive briefing or public report
Milestones	Residents and community partners	Changes, benefits, what to do	Website, mailers, public meetings

RULE

Brief early. No surprises. Close the loop after every decision.

FIELD TEST · TOWN OF APEX, NC

When disposal capacity drives the decision

The 2026 yard waste and grass-clipping ordinance: a staff recommendation meets resident expectations.

FEB 2026

Council retreat: a 3–2 majority directs staff to signal an intent to end grass collection. Staff later proposes Jan 1, 2027 to keep searching for outlets.

MAY 28

Council tightens yard waste rules (pile limits, contractor removal, excess-volume fees, biweekly service) and defers the grass decision.

AUG 11

Council approves a five-year, non-exclusive agreement with Liberty Waste Solutions to process yard waste through July 2031 — grass excluded.

SEPT 22

Staff recommends ending loose-grass collection Jan 1, 2027. Council votes 4–1 to continue to Nov 10 and asks for a peer and cost comparison.

6,254	tons of yard waste last fiscal year	**~1,750**	tons of grass clippings (about 28%)	**~26,000**	collection points	**Nov 10**	next Council decision

Sources: Town of Apex Council recap (Sept 22, 2026); Apex Answers (Sept 23, 2026); Aug 11, 2026 Council agenda; Sept 15, 2026 work session. Status as of Oct 28, 2026.

FIELD TEST · LESSONS

What Apex teaches about gaining support

Council did not reject the staff recommendation. It asked for the comparison and the cost picture first.

What the numbers explain

- Grass is about 28% of tonnage but needs its own processing path
- Disposal capacity, not collection, is the binding constraint
- Wet grass wears equipment built for leaves
- Hauling distance and tip fees drive every alternative’s cost

What Council and residents tell us

- Residents built lawn-care routines around a Town service
- Elected officials want peer comparisons and cost differences
- Education on grasscycling must come before the change
- Regional capacity is a shared problem, not one town’s

LESSON **Bring the disposal answer, the cost comparison and the resident story before the vote.**

TAKE-HOME TOOL · BOARD BRIEFING

What an effective board briefing sounds like

Five elements, in an order that is easy to follow and easy to repeat.

01

The community problem

In residents' terms

02

What the evidence shows

Baseline, trend, cost of inaction

03

Options and trade-offs

Including doing nothing

04

Our recommendation

And why it fits the outcomes

05

The decision and next check-in

What we will report, and when

> *Our data shows a repeatable service issue concentrated on certain routes. We tested the likely causes, evaluated three options and recommend a limited pilot within existing authority. We will return with operational and financial results before asking for expanded funding.*

WATCH FOR

Five ways good programs lose support

Solution before diagnosis	The debate becomes about a truck, vendor or policy before the problem is agreed.
Data without context	A stack of metrics does not tell leadership which decision matters.
Surprise funding request	No time for questions, coalition-building or financial planning.
Overpromising results	Unsupported forecasts undermine credibility after launch.
Silence after approval	Leaders lose sight of wins, issues and accountability.

THE LEADERSHIP ASK

Municipalities buy outcomes, not shiny equipment

A truck, cart, route redesign or contract is a means. The goal is measurable public value.



Outcome

Cleaner, safer, reliable and more sustainable neighborhoods



Evidence

Baseline, cost by line of service, participation and performance



Alignment

Staff ownership, executive sponsorship and elected-official trust

Relationships create the opportunity. **Data** makes the case. **Alignment** drives the decision. **Results** sustain the support.

WRAP-UP

Could you answer it tomorrow? Now you have a way to.

Know your numbers

Break the blended rate down by service line, and know the assumptions behind each number.

Know your audience

One set of facts, framed for residents, elected officials and staff, delivered before the vote.

Know your outcomes

Decide what success looks like first, then measure and report against it.

YOUR COMMITMENT

Write down one decision coming before your board in the next six months — and the first play you'll run on it.

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Data builds the case. Communication builds confidence. Results build trust.

DISCUSSION: Which decision in your community would benefit most from this playbook, and which play would you run first?

REFERENCES

Sources and North Carolina context

Method and policy context

American Society for Quality (ASQ): DMAIC overview
asq.org/quality-resources/dmaic

NC DEQ: 2024–2034 State Solid Waste and Materials Management Plan
deq.nc.gov (Solid Waste Section, resources and data)

NC General Statutes §§ 130A-309.09A and 130A-309.09B

Town of Apex field test

Town of Apex, Regular Council Meeting Recap, Sept 22, 2026
apexnc.org/DocumentCenter/View/56752

Town of Apex, Apex Answers: Collection of Grass Clippings, Sept 23, 2026
apexnc.org/2201/Apex-Answers

Town of Apex, Yard Waste Collection
apexnc.org/563/Yard-Waste-Collection

Town of Apex Council agenda, Aug 11, 2026: yard waste agreement with Liberty Waste Solutions
apexnc.org (Council meetings and agendas)

Cadence and illustrative math are instructional examples, not legal requirements or measured results. Confirm the Town of Apex outcome after the Nov 10, 2026 Council meeting.

LET'S KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

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