

ICMA Program Excellence Awards Nomination

Denton's Great American Cleanup

Introduction

The Great American Cleanup (GAC) is a nationwide, annual community cleanup and beautification effort led by Keep America Beautiful between the months of March and May. Denton, Texas is one of more than 20,000 American communities that participate in GAC each spring, and the cleanup event has deep ties in the Denton community, tracing back nearly 30 years. Since 1989, Denton's GAC has been hosted by the nonprofit organization and local Keep America Beautiful affiliate, Keep Denton Beautiful, Inc. (KDB). The program continues to grow in participation and impact, topping 2,000 volunteers, more than 100 miles of roadway cleaned, and as much as six tons of litter cleaned in recent years.

The success of GAC in Denton has largely been determined by a fundamental collaborative partnership that makes the event possible – the contractual public-private partnership between KDB and the City of Denton. Historically, KDB began in 1987 as a City Council-appointed Citizen's Task Force whose primary role was to recommend improvements to major City entrances. By 1995, the organization had earned its 501(c)(3) status and Articles of Incorporation. Today, KDB maintains a relationship with the City through a unique and mutually beneficial contract agreement, whereby the City provides a budget for operating and personnel expenses, and KDB returns the City's investment more than 250% by annually operating more than 13 grass roots community engagement programs in the areas of litter prevention, community beautification and tree planting. The nonprofit KDB, Inc. is governed by an 11-member Board of Directors, which oversees the strategic direction of the organization and its programs, and secures program funding through traditional nonprofit sources of support such as

grants, sponsorships, and individual contributions. This arrangement means that KDB takes very little administrative overhead from donations, grant funding, and other community contributions – so more of the public’s support goes directly to the programs KDB provides.

GAC is a prime example of how effective the partnership between KDB and the City of Denton can be at achieving high levels of citizen engagement, and a visible community impact. The collaboration between KDB and City departments such as Solid Waste & Recycling, Water Utilities, Parks & Recreation, Sustainability, Public Communication, and others helps to mobilize tens of hundreds of volunteers each year to improve aesthetics, health, and quality of life in Denton.

Community Need

As outlined in the often-referenced *Litter in America* Study completed for Keep America Beautiful (P.W. Schulz and S. Stein, 2009), both litter (the actual waste material that is not disposed of properly) and littering behavior (the act of littering) are pervasive and ongoing problems throughout the United States. This study found that plastic litter in particular increased in frequency by 165% since 1969; cigarette butt litter has been identified in follow-up studies as the number one most littered item in America. *Litter in America* researchers Schulz and Stein noted that the bulk of the cost to clean up litter is incurred by private business – a figure estimated at \$9.1 billion a year. The research also delved into the causes of littering behavior, and found that citizens litter when they feel a lack of ownership, when they believe someone else is taking care of the problem, or when litter has already accumulated in an area.

The Great American Cleanup is one of many programs developed by Keep America Beautiful in the 1960s and 1970s to respond to the problems of roadside litter and littering

behavior. National volunteer cleanup efforts such as GAC were coupled with iconic anti-littering campaigns from Keep America Beautiful, most notably the “Iron Eyes Cody” public service announcement. Through this combined approach, Keep America Beautiful sought to not only abate existing litter, but to prevent future littering behavior.

Like in many communities nationwide, GAC was initiated locally in Denton to abate roadside litter and engage the community in the future prevention of littering. In the mid- to late-1980s, the City of Denton employed a litter crew of two full-time employees to address the problem; however, in 2005, these positions were cut, leaving a gap in roadside litter abatement efforts for the city. GAC has helped to fill this gap to some degree, mobilizing hundreds of volunteers to remove roadside litter that would otherwise not be cleaned up.

Our numbers show that, despite these efforts, litter continues to be a significant problem for our community. The annual Community Appearance Index – a citywide survey of roadside litter conditions conducted by KDB – found that Denton’s litter rates have increased in recent years. In 2008, the city scored 1.4 on a litter prevalence scale of 1 to 4 (1 being least littered, 4 being most littered); in 2015, that number had risen to 1.6.

Implementation and Cost

In 2014, the total cost to administer this program was \$7,769.81. A total of \$8,000 in sponsorships, grants, and individual contributions allowed KDB to underwrite this program in its entirety. To dispose of the massive amounts of litter collected through this program, the City of Denton Solid Waste & Recycling Department provides in-kind disposal services, rear load collection trucks, and staff on the day of the cleanup, totaling around \$1,000. The Solid Waste & Recycling Department also hosts a Free Disposal Day in conjunction with the Great American

Cleanup, which provides residents an opportunity for residents to dispose of certain household items at the municipal landfill free of charge. In 2015, the Landfill processed 57 tons of waste through the Free Disposal Day, for a total in-kind value of \$6,343.50. Finally, the City's Parks & Recreation Department provides event venue space at the Denton Civic Center, where KDB hosts a Volunteer Appreciation Party following the cleanup event (value: approximately \$1,500).

Results and Outcomes

The impact of the Great American Cleanup is primarily measured each year by the number of volunteers participating, and the total tons of litter cleaned from the roadways, waterways, and public spaces in Denton. For the 2014 event on March 29, a total of 1,609 volunteers cleaned just shy of three tons of litter, both trash and recyclables. From 2014 to 2015, Denton's GAC program grew exponentially in both volunteer participation and cleanup totals. Volunteer numbers saw a jump from 1,609 to 2,518 volunteers, a 36% increase. These volunteers represented nearly 150 unique groups who contributed a total of 7,554 hours of service, worth an estimated \$174,270.78. From 2014 to 2015, the total litter collected from streets and roadways increased by 52%, from 2.9 to over 6 tons of trash and recyclables.

The broad community reach of Denton's GAC is also a significant output of this program, and indicates the high level of support and impact that GAC is able to have each year. Volunteers of all ages and backgrounds participate, including college students, community members, businesses, scout groups, churches and schools.

To measure the ongoing problem of litter and littering behavior in Denton, KDB conducts an annual roadside litter scan – the Community Appearance Index - and has recruited help from

local university research students at the University of North Texas to monitor littering behavior and attitudes among community stakeholders.

Lessons Learned

The principal lesson learned through the Great American Cleanup is that the impact of this program would not be anywhere near as significant without the partnerships that exist between the City, nonprofits like Keep Denton Beautiful, and countless volunteer and community organizations.

Conclusion

Through collaboration and community involvement, GAC has been able to involve more than 150,000 volunteers over the last 10 years, and clean dozens of tons of litter from Denton's streets, waterways, and public spaces. The GAC program epitomizes community partnership and collaboration and, because of this, will undoubtedly continue to have a positive impact in the Denton community for many years to come.