

That's Garbage! Why Trash Is Becoming More Visible Across Rockland County



ROCKLAND COUNTY, NY – From busy shopping centers to neighborhood bus stops, litter is becoming increasingly visible across Rockland County, raising concerns among residents about quality of life, public health, and accountability.

At high-traffic destinations like the Palisades Center, as well as surrounding strip malls, grocery stores, and transit stops, discarded cups, food wrappers, and plastic bottles are no longer confined to parking lots. Shoppers say they are now seeing trash left behind inside stores themselves, including along aisles at retailers such as Macy's and T.J. Maxx—often just steps away from available garbage bins.

According to a Rockland County official, cleanup of trash in town places would be the responsibility of the town. Private property is in the prevue of the property owner, and the county roads are dealt with by the Sheriff's office that uses community service to clean up on those roads.

The problem appears most noticeable in densely populated, high-traffic areas, including parts of Spring Valley, where residents say litter has become more frequent along commercial corridors and near public transportation stops. But while the visibility may vary by location, the underlying causes are far more consistent—and not unique to any one community.

Urban planning and behavioral research show that litter tends to increase in places where foot traffic is high and spaces are shared by large numbers of people throughout the day. In these environments, a psychological phenomenon known as “diffusion of responsibility” often takes hold. Individuals are less likely to feel personally accountable for disposing of their trash, assuming that someone else—whether a store employee, maintenance worker, or municipality—will take care of it.

That mindset is often compounded by simple convenience. Even when a trash can is nearby, the small effort required to walk a few extra steps can be enough for someone to discard an item improperly, especially in fast-paced retail or transit settings. Over time, as even small amounts of litter begin to accumulate, the environment itself starts to change behavior. Researchers refer to this as the “broken windows” effect: once an area appears unclean, others are more likely to contribute to the disorder, reinforcing a visible cycle of neglect.

In retail environments, enforcement is also limited. Employees at stores are typically focused on customer service and operations and are unlikely to confront shoppers over littering. In public spaces, enforcement varies, and the absence of immediate consequences can further normalize the behavior. Add in everyday distractions—phones, time pressure, or simple inattention—and what might seem like deliberate disregard is often a mix of habit and low awareness.

Still, individual behavior tells only part of the story. Many residents point to broader infrastructure and maintenance challenges that can make the problem worse. In some areas, trash receptacles fill quickly and may not be emptied frequently enough, particularly in high-use zones. Overflowing bins, poorly maintained dumpsters, or loose waste from commercial properties can create spillover, allowing garbage to spread into surrounding areas even without direct littering.

As a result, what people see on the ground is often a combination of direct littering and systemic gaps. Communities with higher population density and heavy commercial activity naturally generate more waste in a concentrated space, placing added strain on sanitation systems. When maintenance, enforcement, and infrastructure do not keep pace, the effects become highly visible.

While some residents have attempted to link the issue to specific neighborhoods, data and comparable patterns across the country suggest otherwise. Litter is most strongly associated with density, traffic, and service levels—not demographics. Similar conditions produce similar outcomes in suburban shopping centers, urban corridors, and transit hubs nationwide, regardless



of who lives nearby. In Rockland County, the growing visibility of litter is increasingly being viewed as a broader quality-of-life concern. Beyond aesthetics, it raises questions about environmental impact, public perception, and the long-term health of commercial districts that rely on consistent foot traffic.

Addressing the issue will likely require more than individual behavior changes. More frequent sanitation, better placement and servicing of waste bins, consistent property maintenance, and visible enforcement all play a role in shaping how public spaces are treated. Just as importantly, maintaining a clean environment from the outset can help reset expectations and discourage the cycle from taking hold.

For now, the presence of litter—from parking lots to store aisles—serves as a reminder that the condition of shared spaces is shaped by both systems and behavior. And as Rockland continues to grow, the question facing residents and officials alike is not just why the problem is happening, but how to bring those spaces back under control.