

Neighborhood Fare

Tools for Connecting
Local Food Systems

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Food Waste & Composting

POST-
CONSUMPTION

In a food-forward neighborhood, food waste enriches the soil, generates power, and builds local economies.

Food scraps account for as much as 20% of the waste New York City sends to landfills each year. Composting is a primary means of processing food waste into productive use, along with anaerobic digestion.



OBSERVATIONS

|| Diverting food waste from landfills builds a circular food system.

At every phase of the food ecosystem — production to processing and manufacturing to transportation and distribution to retail and consumption — food waste could instead be collected and recycled.

The circular use of food waste can help meet community demands for productive soil, energy, and even food consumption. Food scraps are a key ingredient in creating compost, a biological nutrient that fertilizes and remediates soil, increasing food production capacity. Anaerobic digestion can transform food waste into biogas, which can power waste facilities and transportation vehicles. In New York City, up to 68% of food discarded may still be edible; this food can be diverted to match consumer demand through tactical system connections.

Diverting food waste from landfills can reduce the need for waste transportation and transfer stations, which create health disparities in environmental justice communities. A circular food system fosters a green economy and new jobs: microhaulers can collect and transport waste to composting sites, compost-rich soil can be sold to farmers, food scraps can feed animals on farms, and more.

|| New York City's composting landscape is currently fragmented and under-resourced.

Food waste collection in New York is split between residential and commercial systems.

The Department of Sanitation (DSNY) manages residential collection of food waste through a voluntary program currently available in seven community districts, which uses brown bins to collect residential food waste and turns this into compost. DSNY also partners with local community gardens and other community-based organizations who function as drop-off sites for people to drop off food scraps at these local sites. Strong partnerships are essential for the success of such programs.



Commercial food waste is privately managed. Distribution facilities, food businesses and restaurants must pay for food waste collection services. Some have formed partnerships with local emergency food providers such as food pantries to donate unused edible food. Some contract with local microhaulers who collect the food waste and transport it to compost sites.

Across this fragmented system, lack of funding for citywide programs like organic curbside collection or operational support to local organizations managing food waste collection is a major challenge.

|| Compost facilities are most effective when sited near other food infrastructure.

Effective food waste processing systems would integrate infrastructure across phases of the food system. Compost sites are often located within community gardens, but could also be sited on rooftops, courtyards, or vacant lots.

Spaces near emergency food distribution, retail outlets, or restaurant corridors are ideal, as are sites within IBZs where food processors and manufacturers are located.

Co-locating compost collection sites with community gardens or community-based organizations that host food pantries can create hyperlocal circular models. Food scraps can be collected on the same day that food distribution takes place. These scraps can be composted and turned into soil that a garden can use to grow more food, which then gets distributed through the pantry. Microhaulers can collect food waste within the broader community for composting. This would centralize the food ecosystem into spatial clusters and help disseminate information and education around the cycle of food in our neighborhoods.

Though this circular model is not currently prevalent in New York, relevant precedents do exist. The Campaign Against Hunger's Urban Agro-Ecological Centers have created a "farm-to-pantry" distribution loop, composting any unused produce. Green City Force's farms at NYCHA

campuses encourage residents to swap food scraps for farm produce, as does the Red Hook Initiative's Red Hook Houses Farm.

Education, incentives, and policy change all contribute to composting uptake.

Investments in composting infrastructure will not be effective if uptake of composting does not increase. Certain food service, preparation, and retail businesses are currently mandated to separate their organic waste under the NYC Commercial Organics Law. But residential food waste collection and composting is not sufficiently encouraged or incentivized, especially in higher-density neighborhoods and environmental justice communities.

In the long term, composting and curbside collection should be mandated programs for all residential and commercial waste. In the short term, investments in education can build awareness and buy-in on composting.





Site & History

St. James Compost is a community-led compost site located at St. James Church in Elmhurst, Queens. The site, located in a previously underutilized part of the church's lot, has four small garden beds as well as compost infrastructure. It was founded in 2017.

Operation

The site is managed by two co-founders, who are trained as Master Composters by the Department of Sanitation, and one resident. They accept food scrap drop offs daily, though the site was inactive during the pandemic until restarting activities in 2021.

St. James Church provides fiscal sponsorship and the Reverend provides administrative support. The site leaders have received resources and guidance from the NYC Compost Project at the Queens Botanical Garden.

Activities

St James Compost is able to process food scraps on site with a traditional three-bin composting system as well as two Earth Machines. Between March 2019 and February 2020, the site received an average of 78 drop-offs a week and processed an average of 114 gallons of food scraps a month.

In October 2021, after a pandemic hiatus, St. James Compost began a partnership with Big Reuse, which picks up two 64-gallon totes of food scraps a week and processes them off-site, increasing the site's capacity to receive food scraps from the community.

The site's central location is ideal for a community compost site — adjacent to food retail establishments, houses of worship, residential homes, school, and the St. James food pantry. However, the site is in need of more volunteers to expand programming.

Funding Sources

St. James Compost has received funding from the Citizens Committee for New York City's micro grants for composting programs.

Food System Connections

Previously, the site has accepted scraps from the adjacent grocer, but due to capacity constraints they were not able to continue this partnership.



Case Study

St. James Compost

Site Size

Approximately 400 sq ft



RECOMMENDATIONS

→ **Mandate citywide residential and commercial composting.**

Meeting the City's goal to collect 90% of organic waste by 2030 is only possible if organic waste collection is mandated citywide. The enforcement mechanism could be fines for noncompliance modeled off of recycling fines, or financial incentives, especially for underserved households and businesses. This mandate will make composting enterprises more viable at both small and large scales.

→ **Connect and fund local loops.**

City agencies are already well-connected to networks of composters, community gardens, food pantries, and food businesses through programs run by the Department of Parks and Recreation (NYC Parks), DSNY, the Human Resources Administration (HRA), the Department of Small Business Services (SBS) and other agencies. The City can foster hyper-local food systems by facilitating connections between these entities to handle food waste. For example, the City could support partnerships between composters and gardens by allocating funding for staffing, programming, or compost infrastructure. The City could fund food pantries to contract with microhaulers to manage any food waste locally.

→ **Invest in microhaulers.**

New York City's microhaulers — of which there are about five businesses across the city, including BK ROT, GreenFeen OrganiX, and Reclaimed Organics — collect organic waste by bike, e-bike, or low emissions vehicle, and process them locally. The City should invest in this powerful community-led model by engaging with microhaulers to identify opportunities to grow the sector. The City may consider a program that provides grants to microhaulers to expand their capacity while also providing incentives or tax credits to small businesses using microhaulers.

→ **Focus educational campaigns at sites of food consumption.**

Education and information on separating organic waste and the benefits of composting should be centered around major food consumption and retail spaces such as schools, restaurant districts, public plazas, etc.

→ **Prioritize historically disinvested neighborhoods for composting incentives.**

Current City-funded compost initiatives primarily focus on wealthier neighborhoods. In order to connect composting with environmental justice, the City should prioritize resources to expand composting in historically disinvested neighborhoods. One way to do this could be through a pilot project with SNAP beneficiaries in which an extra amount is allocated if they can show proof of food waste composting. This proof can be a letter given to them by local community-based organizations. Alternatively, the City could explore leveraging Health Bucks to incentivize composting. Local compost sites could distribute Health Bucks to residents who drop off compost.



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