

NYC's community composting cuts are putting its curbside plan at risk

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On a chilly day in December, a crowd gathered in the shadow of City Hall in lower Manhattan to chant, listen to speeches and wave signs crafted for the occasion. "No cuts to compost!" read one held by a man

with shoulder-length gray hair. "Compost Adams" read another, with a picture of the New York City mayor. One sign featured a rat-faced Statue of Liberty.

Among the crowd were employees from many of the seven organizations that together form the fabric of New York City's community composting.

Each week, residents bring these groups their food scraps—collected in bespoke tins, old yogurt containers and ziplock bags—to be transformed into compost that can fertilize everything from street trees to community gardens. It's a useful service in a city where many lack space to compost on their own: New York's community-composting programs divert an estimated 4,150 tons of food scraps (often called "organics") from landfills each year, according to GrowNYC, one of the organizations.

Or at least, they used to. In November, Mayor Eric Adams announced plans to eliminate \$3 million in city support for the programs—the bulk of their funding—as part of a 5% budget cut. On Jan. 16, the city restored some of its planned cuts, but community composting is still on the chopping block, and only a few programs have been granted a partial reprieve by donors.

To fill the composting gap, the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) points to a citywide rollout of curbside composting that it aims to complete by year's end.

"After years of efforts, New York City will soon finally have a free, easy, straightforward, universal curbside composting program," Joshua Goodman, DSNY's deputy commissioner for public affairs and customer experience, told Bloomberg Green.

But that program, which will eventually make food-scrap composting

mandatory, is also experiencing delays. More important, advocates say killing community programs hinders the adoption levels needed to make a curbside program work—and threatens the city's goal of reaching net-zero emissions by 2050.

Community composting, "is critical to the success of the overall organics curbside collection program," said Eric A. Goldstein, who directs the New York City Environment Program at the National Resources Defense Council. "Saying everyone's going to have curbside collection is very different from having every building participating, people putting it out for collection, and understanding why composting makes sense."

New Yorkers produce a lot of trash. Each year, DSNY uses more than 2,000 trucks to collect over 3 million tons of waste, 80% of which is sent to landfills or incinerators. (Most of the rest is recycled.) Roughly a third of the waste collected is made up of food scraps. Nationwide, nearly half of food waste is produced by households, which on average throw out about a third of the food they purchase.

When food waste encounters the low-oxygen environment of a landfill, it releases an explosive mix of methane and carbon dioxide—both potent greenhouse gases. When food waste is incinerated, its moisture content "fouls up the burn," Goldstein said, making that burn less efficient and exacerbating air pollution.

None of that is good for the environment, or for people. In New York City, landfills are the third leading source of emissions after buildings and transportation. Nationwide, they release as much CO₂ each year as 23.1 million gas-powered cars. Meanwhile, studies have shown that people who live near incinerators experience higher rates of cancer and reproductive issues.

Composting can mitigate many of these problems by transforming food

scraps into a rich earthy matter that fortifies soil. This reduces some of the real estate needed for waste and generates between 38% and 83% fewer emissions than landfilling, according to one recent study. Putting food waste in sturdy bins with secure lids, instead of hauling it to the curb in trash bags, is also more effective when it comes to controlling New York City's rat population.

At scale, composting can also be cheaper. Seattle started a composting program in 1989 and by 2015 had made it mandatory for all residences, multifamily buildings and businesses. One analysis of residential composting in the city found that it reduced costs by \$17.2 million between 2007 and 2018.

Last year, New York City spent \$470 million exporting waste to landfills and incinerators.

The city's modern attempts at composting date back to the 1960s, when the rise of community gardens overlapped with growing concerns about landfill space. In 1993, DSNY launched the New York Compost Project, which enlisted local botanical gardens to boost composting education. Over time the project expanded to include community programs run by local groups.

"It was a loose-knit group of volunteers who wanted people to have the ability to drop off food scraps at the Fort Greene GreenMarket on Saturdays," said Marisa DeDominicis, founder and chief executive officer of Earth Matter, a nonprofit that grew out of that effort and is one of the groups that lost funding. At first the collections were sent to a rotating number of [community gardens](#), then in 2011 New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn secured funding for 12 greenmarkets to start officially taking food scraps.

Taking cues from such grassroots efforts, each of the city's last few

administrations has made its own attempt to scale up composting. In 2013, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pledged to roll out composting citywide. (Bloomberg is the founder and majority owner of Bloomberg LP, the parent company of Bloomberg News.)

In 2015, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced plans to reduce NYC's residential waste 90% by 2030, a vision he laid out in a document that mentions composting more than 30 times. In early 2023, Adams vowed to expand a curbside program in Queens to the rest of the city, framing it as essential to addressing the rat problem.

"The Adams administration is in the process of rolling out the nation's largest and easiest curbside composting program, picking up compostable material from every resident on their recycling day and putting that material to beneficial use," Goodman said. The program is expected to cost \$18.7 million this year.

In practice, though, scaling up New York's composting adoption has been slow going. After COVID-19 hit in 2020, de Blasio cut more than \$20 million from the composting budget, halted curbside pickups for 16 months and paused community programs for even longer. Last year, Adams delayed parts of the curbside program's rollout from March 2024 until October, also citing budget concerns.

Once the curbside-pickup program is fully rolled out—and after a three-month grace period—the city is expected to make composting of yard waste, food scraps and soiled paper mandatory by March 2025. Failure to comply will result in tickets ranging from \$25 to \$100 for the first offense, depending on the size of the residence, and up to \$400 for the third offense. The fines mirror those DSNY currently issues for failure to separate recyclables.

But New York isn't known for its recycling prowess, Goldstein pointed

out. "We've done a pretty mediocre job on recycling," he said. "We've been stuck at 17% recycling for two decades."

And while food waste processed through community programs often becomes compost that locals can see themselves, much of the waste collected curbside has a different destination: the Newtown Creek Wastewater Resource Recovery Facility in Brooklyn, which turns it into biogas. Roughly half of that biogas is used to heat the facility itself. The rest is meant to feed into National Grid, the local utility's natural gas system, and help heat homes. That initiative was slated to begin in 2015 but didn't go online until June 2023. By November, it was offline. The city's Department of Environmental Protection, which oversees the facility, says it is back online now.

In a statement, DEP said that last year Newtown Creek processed approximately 624 million pounds of organics. Some 95% of the organics brought to the facility are "ultimately put towards a productive use," DEP said, including biogas, fertilizer and other soil replacements. The remaining 5% gets landfilled, but the agency said it's on track to eliminate that remainder by 2026.

New York City's composting whiplash threatens more than its goal of reaching net zero by 2050; it risks eroding existing progress. By 2023, the city was home to more than 200 DSNY-recognized compost drop-off locations, all of them served by community composters focused on engaging the public. It's boots-on-the-ground work that composting advocates say translates into uptake for curbside programs and at-home bins.

"It's certainly not the Department of Sanitation going and knocking on doors saying, "Excuse me, you put the cans and bottles in the organics bin," DeDominicis said. "That's what community composters are doing."

Here, too, Seattle shows the benefits of a consistent approach. Today about one-third of the city's food waste is diverted from landfills, compared to 1% in New York City. Kate Kurtz, who leads the organics and landscape resource conservation program for Seattle Public Utilities, said education is central to the city's success. Nearly everywhere in Seattle offers a black bin for garbage, a blue bin for recycling and a green bin for composting.

You "have to set up the system to make those behaviors easy," Kurtz said. Even then, "you're constantly having to re-educate people."

Seattle invests heavily in outreach, which includes everything from sending out mailers to recruiting volunteers known as Master Composters. During a summer concert series at the city's zoo, for example, Master Composters were "training people as they came up to dispose of their materials," Kurt said.

New York City's own Master Composter program was among the outreach initiatives eliminated with the recent budget reductions. "They're cutting the team that's talked to over 75,000 people this year," said Justin Green, executive director at Big Reuse, a community program that until the cuts had been picking up [food scraps](#) from 75 locations in the city.

DSNY's Goodman said the department still has an outreach team whose educational programs include the expansion of curbside composting. "This team oversaw a canvassing operation that knocked on the door of every single residential building with nine or fewer units in both Brooklyn and Queens," he said, estimating that they spoke to around 100,000 people.

While New York's composting devotees are frustrated by the imminent demise of community programs, they aren't giving up. In December, an

anonymous donor gave GrowNYC, one of the programs, enough money to last through June. Green says three other programs—Big Reuse, Earth Matters and the Lower East Side Ecology Center—received enough last-minute funding from Mill, a home food-recycling company, to restore 20% of their operations.

But it wasn't enough to prevent layoffs, including seven composting staff and nine outreach staff at Big Reuse.

"The most urgent crisis our planet faces right now is our climate," New York City Council member Shekar Krishnan said at the rally in December. "For us, and the generations that come after us, composting is one of the most basic ways that we can show that we will care for our climate, that we care for our city, that we care for our parks, that we care for our planet."

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