



Focus: Recycling & Waste Management

What's Left In the Garbage Can?

Municipalities tackle waste

By Randall Solomon, Executive Director, Sustainable Jersey



Over the past 30 years, more of our garbage in New Jersey has been recycled and kept out of landfills and incinerators. Recently, however, progress has slowed. New Jersey is coming up short on the State's statutory target to achieve a 50% municipal waste stream recycling rate, which currently stands at 43%.

Nearly 45% of our garbage is organic, so food waste is one of the largest sources of municipal waste. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that more food reaches landfills and incinerators than any other single material in our everyday trash, comprising 21.6% of all discarded municipal solid waste. The Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic estimates that 40% of food destined for consumption in the United States goes to waste. Organics recycling is a hot topic for Sustainable Jersey green teams and municipalities that want to reduce their

waste stream, especially because the food waste in landfills produces methane gas that is one of the most potent contributors to climate change.

Goals for garbage

The overall goals are to maximize food consumption (waste reduction) while preventing what is left from going to the landfill (food recycling). One way to expand food waste recycling is to start at the end point by banning food from disposal in



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landfills and incinerators. California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont already restrict the amount of food and other organic waste that can be put in landfills. Maryland and New York are considering similar laws. In 2017, the New Jersey Legislature passed S-3027, the “Food Waste Reduction Act.” This law adopts the National goal to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (NJ DEP) is working on a plan to achieve this goal. S-1206 is also moving in the New Jersey Legislature to ban the disposal of food from large food generators where composting facilities are available, such as supermarkets, restaurants, hospitals and prisons (see OpEd page 20).

The goal of the ban is to increase public and private sector investment in food waste recycling infrastructure that will provide cost-effective management options to towns, schools, commercial establishments, and residents. The potential impact of this legislation on green teams is that the cost for recycling food will come down as New Jersey-based processing facilities are created, thus making the implementation of local programs more feasible.

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field and food is a great example. There are good options to reduce food loss and waste at the local level,” said Gary Sondermeyer, Vice President of Operations, Bayshore Recycling, and Chair, Sustainable Jersey Waste and Recycling Task Force. Sondermeyer, who has been at the forefront of recycling policy in New Jersey for over 30 years, added, “New Jersey can lead in food waste

recycling if we work together to pass laws that enforce behavior, build the necessary foundation to attract investment, and create jobs to set up the proper technology and infrastructure throughout the State.”

Sustainable Jersey’s Gold Star Standard for Waste

Food waste is one of 16 waste management actions in the Sustainable

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TOWNS AT WORK

Princeton's Curbside Organic Waste Pick-up Service The Municipality of Princeton offers New Jersey's first curbside organic waste pickup services for residents. The program tag line is: If it Grows, It Goes into the green bin. Princeton piloted the program in 2011, and now offers it as service to all of its 9,500 households. With Princeton's curbside organic program, residents pay \$65 a year for weekly collection of all food scraps, soiled paper, and yard trimmings. Princeton received a \$20,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation to create a marketing and educational campaign to increase program participation.

Princeton Recycling Coordinator Janet Pellichero said, "Food waste recycling is the low hanging fruit for municipal recycling. Any method to divert food, no matter what its use, is beneficial because it keeps organics out of the landfill and helps us deal with rising municipal waste recycling expenses. It's a no brainer."

Mercer County has the highest solid waste disposal fees in New Jersey. Each ton of disposed solid waste is charged a \$118 "tipping fee" to dump it onto the transfer station floor before it is moved to a landfill, where it is charged an additional fee. The fee is charged to the garbage hauler, but is funded by the fees residents pay to have trash collected. By removing the organic material from the trash and recycling it, the tipping fee is no longer charged.

Pellichero added, "Organics recycling also helps your moral bottom line. I hope New Jersey becomes a front runner and that Princeton can be a model for other towns considering food waste recycling. It's very heartwarming to see programs expand. Food is now a commodity that is looked at in a totally different way."

City of Lambertville Third Can Program The City of Lambertville's Third Can Program started in 2014 with support from a \$20,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation to help offset the cost to program participants. The Lambertville Environmental Commission launched the program after recognizing that food waste comprised 15% of the City's waste stream. In only its second year of operation, area restaurants and Lambertville Public Schools began to participate as well, resulting in a 454% increase in the amount of food waste recycled. Combined with the City's single-stream recycling program, recycling food waste through the Third Can Program is saving money and protecting the environment.

Maple Shade Township Food Waste Recycling in the School District

Using a \$10,000 Sustainable Jersey grant funded by the PSEG Foundation to implement and test the effectiveness of food waste recycling in its four schools, Maple Shade Township's cafeteria food was collected and processed for recycling. Since Maple Shade Township pays for solid waste disposal at the schools, this diversion to recycling had a direct impact on the cost of service to the taxpayers. For the one-year pilot program, the Township avoided \$1,204 in solid waste tipping fees and recycled over 15 tons of food waste.

Diverting Edible Food to Feed the Hungry Municipalities around the country are also establishing programs to move edible whole food out of the landfill by distributing it to the hungry. Approximately 72 billion pounds of good food ends up in landfills and incinerators each year in the United States. In New Jersey, nearly 1 million people face hunger every day and nearly 300,000 of them are children. New Jersey has existing food distribution networks that link food with food pantries, community kitchens, and shelters. These networks can be connected with the edible food before it goes in the trash. DEP's plan to achieve the 50% waste reduction goal noted earlier in S-3027 will identify strategies to maximize food reuse.



Jersey program for 445 participating municipalities to encourage them to voluntarily achieve the state's 50% municipal waste stream recycling rate and continue to work toward achieving zero waste through the program's Waste Management Action Area. Municipalities can make significant gains in recycling rates by implementing the slate of Sustainable Jersey waste management actions, including prescription drug disposal, construction waste recycling, materials reuse, pay-as-you-throw pro-

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grams, recycling depots, and more. Towns choose from a menu of over 150 actions to accumulate points toward bronze and silver level certification. It is important to note that towns can only receive points for actions that go above and beyond current regulatory requirements. The waste management action suite is one of the most popular with participating municipalities; over 650 actions have been approved since the program launched in 2009.

In 2017, Sustainable Jersey created the Gold Star Standard for Waste Management and Energy. The Gold Standard in Waste requires municipalities to achieve three overarching goals:

- 1 A 2%-or-more reduction in total solid waste generation.
- 2 An annual total solid waste recycling rate of at least 65%.
- 3 An annual municipal solid waste recycling rate of at least 55%.

A growing number of states have passed or considered state-level tax incentives that offer tax breaks to farmers and small businesses that

donate food rather than throw it away. State tax incentives provide those businesses with a more-tailored incentive and a benefit that is often easier to understand and use than the existing federal one. New Jersey Legislature bill S-3012 is currently being considered; it would encourage businesses, institutions, and schools to donate food before

it goes to waste.

Achieving state level goals related to solid waste, reuse and recycling is critical to becoming a sustainable state. Sustainable Jersey looks forward to supporting and encouraging municipalities as they pursue Sustainable Jersey's Gold Star Standard for Waste and lead on food waste recycling. ♻️

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