
Government of the District of Columbia



DC Department of Public Works

Testimony of
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Public Hearing on
Bill 22-501, the “Residential Composting Incentives
Amendment Act” and DPW’s Implementation of the Sustainable
Solid Waste Management Amendment Act of 2014

Committee on Transportation and the Environment

Councilmember Mary M. Cheh, Chairperson

John A. Wilson Building
Room 412
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004
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Good morning, Chairperson Cheh and members and staff of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment. I am Christopher Shorter, Director of the Department of Public Works (DPW). I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the District's progress in implementing the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act of 2014 and provide some initial analysis of proposed Bill 22-501, the "Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017."

I would like to start by thanking the Mayor and City Administrator for continuing to prioritize policies and programs that will protect our environment for generations to come. Their continued leadership in this area has allowed our city to make great progress in becoming one of the healthiest, greenest, and most livable cities in the nation.

My testimony this morning will be organized into two parts, after which I will be happy to respond to questions. The first section will focus on DPW's progress in implementing the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act of 2014, and the second part will focus on our feedback related to the proposed "Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act."

DPW's Implementation of the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Act

Since the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act (the Act) was passed in 2014, DPW has made great progress in achieving many of the goals outlined in the legislation. While we are always eager to achieve more, I am very proud of all that the District has accomplished in a short period of time.

As you know, DPW's responsibilities under the Act are spread out over several sections within the law. For our purposes this morning, there are two overarching categories that I would like to focus on, under which the vast majority of DPW's statutory responsibilities lie.

- The first category is **governance**—in particular, the establishment of the Office of Waste Diversion (OWD) and the Interagency Waste Reduction Working Group—and how we have built up their respective capacities to meet the requirements and goals set forth by the law.
- The second overarching category is **waste diversion** itself—specifically the progress we've made in the areas of recycling and composting.

Governance

As you know, soon after Mayor Bowser appointed me Interim Director of DPW in June 2015, we reestablished the Office of Waste Diversion and situated it within the Office of the Director. Soon after reestablishing the program, we began hiring capable, talented, and passionate staff for the office. Our Office of Waste Diversion is moving with lightning speed to accomplish many of the goals outlined in the Amendment Act of 2014.

Since its inception, the Office of Waste Diversion has maintained a strong commitment to transparent and accurate reporting. This included publishing required reports and studies after they've been reviewed by the Interagency Waste Reduction Working Group for accuracy, and posting them on the DPW and newly established Zero Waste DC websites. We also regularly present our reports to various stakeholder, non-profit, and regional government and industry groups for feedback.

Along with transparency and accuracy, our agency has shown a commitment to being responsive to questions and concerns from residents. Residents are now able to contact our Office of Waste Diversion team via e-mail (zero.waste@dc.gov), Twitter (@dczerowaste), Facebook (@dczerowaste), and Instagram (@dczerowaste). Community groups, commercial properties, or any group of 15 or more can also request a presentation from our staff through our website. In addition to presentations requested by community groups and partners, the agency has also provided source separation requirements training to the Office of Unified Communications 311 call center staff.

As part of its work, the Office of Waste Diversion also serves as a liaison with neighboring jurisdictions and plays an important role in regional waste reduction campaigns. This past spring, through DPW's Solid Waste Education and Enforcement Program (SWEET), the District partnered with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOCG) on the "Go Recycle" campaign. The campaign's aim was to educate the public about recycling and encourage people to recycle more at work, home, and in public spaces. In total, the campaign achieved 17 million impressions across several media platforms.

In addition to establishing the Office of Waste Diversion, the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act called for the creation of the Interagency Waste Reduction Working Group. The working group was established in February 2016, is chaired by DPW, and meets at least once each quarter. Other members include representatives from the Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE), Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and Department of General Services (DGS). The directors of these agencies also meet biannually. The working group was heavily involved in the creation of the Mayor's List of Recyclables and Compostables and the Zero Waste website, both of which I will discuss in detail later in my testimony. The working group also reviewed and approved the FY 2015 and FY 2016 Solid Waste Diversion Reports and is on track to complete the waste characterization study in FY 2018, which will inform the development of the zero waste plan.

I should also note that DPW completed the public comment period for the regulations outlining DPW's solid waste collector registration and reporting program. We expect the final rules to be published within the next few weeks. DPW has created an online application platform and stands ready to launch registration soon after the regulations take effect.

Waste Diversion

As you know, the District has a goal of diverting 80 percent of its waste by 2032. With the leadership and support from the Mayor, this Committee, the District government, and our community partners, this is a goal we believe we can achieve, and one that we are beginning to make notable progress toward.

In early October, we kicked off a major campaign to educate residents about the Mayor's List of Recyclables and Compostables. Our launch event to promote the expanded list of recyclable items was held at Burroughs Elementary School in Ward 5, which was honored earlier this year among the top-performing *DCPS Recycles!* schools in the District. Along with announcing the new items, DPW let residents know that those living in DPW-serviced households could begin

adding the new items to their bins immediately—three months ahead of the January 1, 2018 requirement.

In conjunction with the launch event, DPW-serviced households received a recycling informational mailer letting them know what can now be recycled throughout the District and introducing them to the expanded list of items. The information in the mailer was reinforced by an advertising campaign that included ads in the Metro, on Metro buses, on Pandora, on social media, and in multiple local print publications. To take advantage of the best practices developed by other cities communicating changes about their recycling programs, we conducted significant research and formed a partnership with the Foodservice Packaging Institute. Along with benefitting from their expertise on foodservice packaging, the organization also donated resources to expand our outreach campaign.

Along with residential requirements, there are also new commercial recycling requirements that go into effect on January 1, 2018. To prepare commercial properties, DPW—in partnership with DOEE—offered 13 recycling webinars and meetings targeting various stakeholder segments, such as colleges and universities, the food and beverage industry, and multifamily residential properties.¹ Participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback about recycling guidance as they transition to the new recycling list. This is in addition to in-person visits to District foodservice establishments DPW conducted in conjunction with DOEE to help explain the new foodservice packaging and recycling requirements.

Additional outreach included numerous stakeholder and community meetings, letters, email blasts, tabling at relevant conferences and expos, a Twitter chat, and earned media pitches. In September, approximately 12,000 DC businesses received a fact sheet on the Mayor’s List, a cover letter further explaining the new recycling requirements, and other pertinent information. On the new Zero Waste website, commercial properties will find an extensive resources section with tools like printable signs, recorded webinars, fact sheets translated in seven languages, and much more. DPW has also recently contracted with ReCollect, a tech company that is in the process of creating a customized “waste wizard” application for DC residents that will allow them to type any item into the app and be given directions on how best to dispose of it.

On the enforcement side, I should note that our Office of Waste Diversion and SWEEP inspectors are cross training with a specific focus on recycling education, commercial recycling, sustainability, DPW’s waste diversion goals, and upcoming regulations such as Solid Waste Collector Reporting, to name a few. In FY 2017, our SWEEP inspectors issued 924 citations for a range of code violations related to recycling. The most common citation, for which 390 tickets were issued, was for failure to separate recycling from other solid waste.

As part of our public outreach, I am also pleased to share that DPW’s Office of Waste Diversion, in partnership with the Interagency Waste Reduction Working Group members, devised and created a new Zero Waste website.² The website serves as a one-stop resource for District residents, businesses, and schools to learn about how to recycle, compost, reduce waste, and properly dispose of hazardous waste. The website also contains extensive information on food

¹ <https://dpw.dc.gov/recyclingcompostlist>

² <https://zerowaste.dc.gov/>

waste prevention, how to opt out of bulk mail, and a directory of charities that accept clothing and durable goods donations. If you haven't seen it yet, I encourage you to visit ZeroWaste.dc.gov.

Expanding the number of recyclable items, educating residents about what they can recycle, and reducing contamination are all important strategies for a sound waste diversion program. Expanding composting throughout the city is another primary strategy, and one that we have made significant progress on. Earlier this year on Earth Day, Mayor Bowser kicked off DPW's first citywide Food Waste Drop-Off program. Through the new free service, residents are able to drop off food waste at designated farmers markets, one in each ward, on Saturdays. Three of these drop-off locations—Columbia Heights, Dupont Circle, and Eastern Market—will also now be open throughout the winter season. The food waste collected at these drop-off locations is composted locally at District community composting sites and at the Prince George's County Organics Compost facility.

As of November 25, the Food Waste Drop-Off program had collected more than 86,000 pounds (40+ tons) of organics from more than 10,000 participants in all eight wards. Early last month, to celebrate the success of the program and to help encourage residents to bring their leftover Halloween pumpkins to the food waste drop-offs, Mayor Bowser and DPW hosted a "pumpkin rescue" at Elsie Whitlow Stokes Community Freedom Public Charter School. As you know, educating young people about the importance of sustainability and getting them in the habit of recycling and composting is key to meeting our city's waste diversion goals. The event also served as the kickoff for DPW's annual leaf collection operations. This year, we expect to collect and compost more than 8,000 tons of leaves and are encouraging residents to bring their yard waste to either of the District's transfer stations for composting. After the holidays, Christmas trees collected by DPW between January 13th and February 2nd, and those brought to the transfer stations, will also be composted.

Earlier this year, as part of our efforts to promote composting, recycling, and the benefits of reducing waste, DPW and DOEE helped host the Kingman Island Bluegrass and Folk Festival for the second year in a row. The 2017 music festival attracted approximately 7,000 fans who, with the help of Green Team volunteers, separated waste into designated zero waste stations. As a result, the festival achieved an impressive 78.8 percent waste diversion rate.

This year also marked the beginning of DPW's grass-cycling campaign, through which we encouraged residents to leave their grass clippings on their lawns instead of putting them in the trash. The U.S. EPA estimates that yard waste trimmings account for 14 percent of the typical residential waste stream. To help educate residents about the benefits of grass-cycling, DPW mailed informational postcards to residents in neighborhoods that produce the most yard waste.

While the success of these and other city composting and waste diversion programs are encouraging, we recognize that large scale progress is going to require larger scale efforts. To this end, and as required by the Sustainable Solid Waste Management Amendment Act, the District hired Resource Recycling Systems in 2016 to conduct a composting collection progress and feasibility study. Our aim was to identify how much organic waste was being generated in the District each year, and get some recommendations for how to take our city's composting to

the next level. I should note that a final copy of this report was released in the spring of 2017, and is publically accessible on both DPW's and the Zero Waste DC website.

The report includes:

- Modeled estimates of food and yard waste generation and potential recovery rates of source-separated organics (food and yard waste) by DPW-serviced residences, multi-family dwellings, commercial landscapers, and the industrial, commercial, and institutional (ICI) sector;
- An assessment of the regional processing capacity for source-separated organics and the possibility of moving source-separated organics through the District's transfer stations to a nearby processing facility;
- A rollout plan for curbside collection of source-separated organics from DPW-serviced households, including costs and multi-year performance metrics; and
- Recommendations related to the transfer of organics.

One of the primary recommendations from that report was for the District to build a 10- to 20-acre organics processing facility, which would help pave the way for curbside composting collection within five years. The 2023 Capital Budget allocates \$8 million for the construction of such a site.

The report estimates that the total amount of organic waste—food and yard waste—generated in the District each year is between 166,810 and 234,774 tons. This represents a substantial portion of the District's total citywide solid waste stream and offers a sizable opportunity for increasing the District's solid waste diversion rate, which currently stands at 23.1 percent (FY 2017) on the residential side. Once rolled out to all DPW-serviced residents, the total annualized cost of the program is estimated to be between \$5.9 and \$9 million per year. The report also estimates the creation of between 68 and 114 new full-time jobs.

The next step in evaluating whether and how to build an in-District composting facility is to develop a site operations plan and design criteria. Aspects of this process that will need to be completed include:

- Identifying how the compost generated by the site would be best utilized;
- Identifying and addressing environmental, health, aesthetic, noise, traffic, and other issues that would be of interest to neighbors of a potential site; and
- Identifying site permitting and zoning requirements.

Given the amount of food and yard waste generated in the District, there is a need for multiple options for reducing and processing the material. To this end, DPW—in partnership with DC Water—commenced a study to assess the feasibility of sending pre-processed food waste to Blue Plains to be converted to methane to generate electricity and produce a class A soil amendment. The study commenced on October 10, 2017, and we anticipate delivery of a final report to the Council by May of next year. Once completed, DPW will explore synergies between composting and codigestion in terms of policy and end-product development and marketing.

Feedback on B22-501, the “Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017”

Moving now to the proposed Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act, let me begin by saying that I am excited to see the committee continue to explore ways to incentivize sustainability. Nationally, New York City; Austin, Texas; and Los Angeles County, California, are some major examples of cities with strong backyard composting programs. Locally, College Park and Greenbelt, Maryland also have strong backyard composting programs. Incentivizing our residents to utilize their organic waste and turn it into compost for their own use is good for the environment and can help grow the District's waste diversion rate.

As we look at ways to encourage residential composting, I want to assure District residents that we are cognizant of our city's increased rodent population, and that the Bowser Administration is actively seeking ways to remediate this issue. We at DPW, and our partners at the Department of Health (DOH), are acutely focused on finding solutions.

I was also heartened to see the proposed bill's focus on composting training. Educating our city about proper recycling and composting practices is very much part of DPW's mission and helps foster a citywide culture focused on sustainability. In this vein, during the 2015/2016 school year, DPW's SWEEP Jr. program, which focuses on youth outreach, presented information about recycling, litter management, and composting in 55 District schools.

Again, we support the bill's intent and are eager to continue working with you on increasing composting in the District. Home composting not only cuts down on disposal fees, it also serves as an important outreach tool to support municipal efforts to grow composting and composting know-how.

Conclusion

Finally, DPW continues to invest in improving our customer service and performance through activities such as optimizing trash and recycling routes, and upgrading our fleet and information technology systems. These investments enhance our performance in the short-term and better position us to rollout new waste diversion programs in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee with testimony and for the Committee's dedication to sustainability issues, which I can assure you DPW shares. I also want to thank the DPW team as well as our partners in other District agencies for the work they've completed thus far.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to respond to questions.