

**Testimony of  
Jessica Tisch, Commissioner  
New York City Department of Sanitation**

**Hearing before the New York City Council  
Committees on Sanitation & Solid Waste Management and Finance**

**Thursday, March 14, 2024  
1:00 P.M.**

**New York City Department of Sanitation’s FY2025 Preliminary Budget and Preliminary  
Mayor’s Management Report**

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Good morning Chair Abreu and members of the City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management. I am Jessica Tisch, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation. I am joined today by First Deputy Commissioner Javier Lojan, Deputy Commissioner, Management and Budget Joseph Antonelli, and Deputy Commissioner, External Affairs Ryan Merola. It is my honor to be here today to bring you the latest news from the front lines of the Trash Revolution.

Under Mayor Adams and with the partnership of this Council, the 10,000 members of the Department of Sanitation are making huge, generational changes to the way 44 million pounds of trash are set at the curb, collected, and processed. It is hard to imagine the scope of this undertaking and what it will mean for our streetscape – an end to the primacy of the black bags, a reclamation of our curbs, and a permanent, meaningful strike against the rats.

These initiatives will allow our City to finally shed the longstanding “Trash City” moniker, and New York City Sanitation Workers are well on their way to bringing dignity back to our neighborhoods.

**CONTAINERIZATION**

The first and most visible front in the Trash Revolution is the War on the Black Bags and their biggest supporters, the rats. Just under one year ago, we set out to do what other cities around the world have done over the last several decades – to get the trash bags off the curb and into secure, rodent-resistant containers, once and for all.

In April 2023, we changed the set-out times for trash, drastically limiting the number of hours the bags can sit on the streets – and heavily incentivizing the use of containers, by effectively requiring them for any business that closes before 8pm and for residents who prefer an earlier set-out time. At the same time, we made significant changes to our operations, to get more of the trash earlier, eliminating an old paradigm that had purposefully scheduled up to 20% of trash to sit out for up to 24 hours. Now, thanks to New York’s Strongest, much of the trash is collected within four hours or less of being set out.

In August, we began requiring secure, lidded containers for all food-related businesses. Restaurants, delis, bodegas, grocery stores, caterers – human food is rat food, and these businesses produce an outsized amount of the waste that attracts our City’s most intolerable inhabitants. In September, that rule extended to all *chain* businesses with five or more locations in the City, the kind of businesses that often produce the largest total volume of trash.

Just two weeks ago, on March 1<sup>st</sup>, these rules came to cover all 200,000 businesses in the City – and their seven billion pounds of annual trash, meaning that one half of all trash in the City has been containerized in less than a year.

And our residential containerization plans are well underway. Last week, we released an RFP to procure stationary on-street containers, like the kind found in Barcelona, Madrid, Buenos Aires, and other places around the world – but virtually unknown in the United States – for use by larger residential buildings. These containers will be serviced by an all-new automated side-loading truck, our superweapon in the fight against filth, which is suitable for collection within the specific confines of both the US regulatory system and New York City’s dense urban streetscape.

The use of this new truck – developed four years faster than industry experts thought possible – is quicker and cleaner than manual collection of loose bags, and far safer for our Sanitation Workers. A full half of Sanitation Worker line of duty injuries are sprains and strains related to the manual collection of trash bags; the Strongest deserve a solution that protects their bodies just as much as every New Yorker deserves a solution that cleans their streets. Uniformed Sanitation Workers Association Local 831 has been a partner every step of the way in the development and implementation of this new strategy and equipment, and I want to thank Harry Nespoli and union leadership for their thoughtfulness and support.

We are building approximately a dozen of these trucks now, for use in the first fully containerized district in Spring/Summer 2025 – right in your backyard, Mister Chair.

To containerize that full district, Manhattan Community Board 9, we will use the following framework, developed through a detailed volumetric analysis:

- Buildings with 31 or more residential units will be the first in the United States to use European-style stationary on-street containers, serviced by the automated side-loading truck. Unlike in many global cities and because of our unique density, the stationary on-street containers will not be “shared” between buildings, but rather assigned to a specific building for use only by residents of that building.
- Buildings with 1-9 residential units will be required to put their trash in individual wheelie bins starting this fall, serviced by the traditional rear-loading Sanitation truck, some of which will be equipped with mechanical tippers.
- Buildings with 10-30 residential units will be given a choice between the two containerization models.

The requirement for lower-density buildings with 1-9 residential units will not be confined to this first district; that requirement will cover ALL buildings of that size citywide this fall, approximately 95% of New York City residential buildings. If a building already has bins, they may continue to use them for approximately two more years; however, official NYC bins will be available for purchase, and will be the cheapest bin of this quality available. In 2026, we will require everyone to transition over to the official bin, but anyone will be able to purchase it well before the outset of the mandate if they prefer to containerize their trash only once. I can today announce that we have selected a vendor to produce and sell these bins, and are in the process of finalizing the contract.

Developing the technology, model, and timeline for mass-scale containerization of trash in New York City – and having the will to get it done – had long been derided as impossible by the cynical supporters of the old system under which smelly, leaky, rat-attracting bags of trash have sat directly on New York City’s curbs.

And on the other side, there were those who said it would be easy – that we could just copy/paste from models in place elsewhere and hope for the best.

These groups were both wrong.

It has taken substantial effort, but the work is underway, and it is getting results. In the portion of 2023 after the Trash Revolution began in earnest in April, calls to 311 regarding rat sightings saw their largest year-over-year decrease since 2010. And in the 10 blocks where residential containerization is being piloted, that same metric declined by an incredible 68% between when the pilot began and the end of the year, compared to the same period the year prior.

Bins work, and I am truly convinced that once we containerize the trash, people will look back at the old way of doing things – at keeping 44 million pounds of trash on our curbs each day – and think, “how did we live that way?”

## **COMPOSTING**

But bins and containers are not the only component of the Trash Revolution – far from it. We are also getting all of the food and yard waste – the kind that attracts rats – out of the trash entirely, implementing universal curbside composting service that **WORKS** for all New Yorkers.

While curbside composting programs have existed in New York City for the last decade, none have ever served more than approximately 40 percent of the city. The largest and easiest curbside composting program ever, currently running in Brooklyn and Queens and coming to the other three boroughs this fall, will be the first to reach 100 percent coverage citywide, providing residents with simple, universal weekly collection of leaf and yard waste, food scraps, and food-soiled paper products on their recycling day.

The development and implementation of this program was no small feat, but after many years of stops and starts, Mayor Adams committed to make it happen, and we are getting it done.

DSNY distributed tens of thousands of bins, sent hundreds of thousands of mailers, and purchased 158 net-new collection trucks as part of a historic investment in making this program work.

The most important thing about this program is its simplicity. There's no need for sign-ups, special dates to remember, or specific locations to visit within limited hours. Simply place your materials out on recycling day, your Sanitation Workers will collect it from your home, and we'll ensure it's put to good use. This is a composting program for all New Yorkers.

Make the separation of compostable material easy, and people will do it. And we have numbers to back this up: in fiscal year 2023, DSNY diverted a record 211 million pounds of compostable material from landfill, an incredible increase from just over 150 million pounds the year before. This is a testament to the value of simple, universal programs, especially given that it includes only a part of our ongoing Citywide roll-out.

These kinds of programs not only improve the customer experience – they are MORE efficient than smaller programs because of economies of scale. We are now collecting more compostable material with fewer truck routes than in old programs.

The ease-of-use principle holds true for our network of nearly 400 Smart Composting Bins across the five boroughs, where residents can drop off their compostable material 24/7 through an easy-to-use smartphone app. These bins are serviced six days per week and have proven to be very popular.

We are also on track to make good on a promise to bring curbside compost collection to every Department of Education school by next week, giving the next generation of composters familiarity with the ease and importance of this program.

Material collected through each of these initiatives – curbside residential collection, smart bins, and schools – is put to beneficial use, either through composting or through anaerobic digestion. The Department produces tens of millions of pounds of finished compost every year at the Staten Island Compost Facility, where in January Mayor Adams and I cut the ribbon on a major expansion. That 33-acre site is now permitted to take up to 165 million pounds of compostable material per year and, as a result of new technology on site, can process it in half the time it used to take – weeks rather than months.

While the City has sufficient permitted and contracted capacity to process compostable material from a citywide program, we are currently engaged in a procurement to distribute that capacity more evenly across the region. City procurement rules limit the extent to which we can talk about future status of processing infrastructure for putrescible waste, but beneficial use and waste equity are both key to our long-term planning.

DSNY would also like to raise the issue of commercial organics separation. Local Law 146 of 2013 requires certain commercial establishments to separate their compostable material, but this law is now substantially out of step with the City's commitment to diversion of compostable waste. The Commercial Waste Zone system will improve commercial diversion, in that DSNY is requiring carters to charge businesses less to collect recyclables and compost than to collect

trash, but we also urge the Council to consider an update that would allow DSNY to require source separation at all commercial establishments, in line with the progress made in residential diversion.

Taken together, reform of commercial organics and the Citywide wraparound residential services will make our streets AND our air cleaner.

## **STRATEGIC CLEANLINESS ENFORCEMENT**

But cleanliness is a shared responsibility, and a Department of 10,000 people – even 10,000 of the Strongest – cannot keep the City clean without 8.5 million New Yorkers doing their part, and effecting that behavioral change requires enforcement. While DSNY will never enforce for its own sake, we are not afraid to do what needs to be done to get the streets clean.

Our enforcement of general cleanliness violations – improper set-out, dirty area, failure to clean 18 inches into the street – the kinds of things you all see each day, and that your constituents are concerned about, has increased significantly. In the last two years, DSNY has entirely rethought our enforcement around quality of life issues, putting a greater focus on getting stuff done for New Yorkers when it comes to the very basic rules around cleanliness.

At the same time, as part of the Adams administration’s “Small Business Forward” initiative, DSNY has lowered or eliminated some fines, particularly administrative requirements for businesses to post signage. We have also formally added a “warnings first” approach to a number of violations around commercial organics separation and processing.

That said, there are several bills before this Council that will empower DSNY to provide more meaningful enforcement of these most basic rules around cleanliness. Int-97, sponsored by Councilmember Ung, Int-11, sponsored by Councilmember Bottcher, and Int-57, sponsored by Councilmember Osse, will allow this Department to hold the worst offenders against cleanliness accountable on behalf of your constituents, and we strongly support their passage.

And we continue to pioneer new strategies to address New Yorkers’ concerns faster and more efficiently – our cameras to capture illegal dumpers and our interagency task force with the NYPD to remove abandoned vehicles, to give just two examples.

Since last year’s budget hearing, DSNY has also become the home of the New York City Office of Street Vendor Enforcement. We do not enforce on Parks property or certain areas like the Brooklyn Bridge, but DSNY has posted or written thousands of warnings focused on cleanliness – failure to remove trash, grease poured down drains – and has seen substantial compliance by street vendors, enforcing only when compliance is not forthcoming.

## **COMMERCIAL WASTE ZONES**

There is also another much larger way in which DSNY is bringing safety, sustainability, and cleanliness to the commercial sector. In January, we announced the contract awards for the Commercial Waste Zone program described in Local Law 199 of 2019. This law was designed to reform the commercial waste hauling system by establishing new safety standards for workers in

the commercial carting industry, improving service for businesses, increasing diversion rates, and reducing vehicle miles traveled as well as harmful emissions from waste hauling vehicles.

The first of New York City's 20 non-exclusive Commercial Waste Zones will come online in the second half of this year in Corona, Elmhurst, and Jackson Heights.

This program will add legal safeguards to the commercial carting industry that will protect workers, business owners, and our environment. We are talking about 12 million miles fewer traveled by commercial carting vehicles. And, making good on a promise from when this program was created, businesses will pay less for the collection of recyclables and compostable material than they do for trash – a citywide average of 32% less for recycling and 18% less for compostable material. That means businesses will have a meaningful financial incentive to separate their waste properly.

## **SNOW**

Of course, even as we talk about the Trash Revolution and the strategic initiatives that are guiding the future of this Department, we have also continued to work to modernize the core DSNY functions New Yorkers have come to expect, including a swift, equitable response to snow. For the first time in two years, NYC experienced significant snow fall, and we were able to deliver snow equity for the first time ever. Thanks to historic investments in this Department, the days of primary, secondary, and tertiary streets are long gone. Every street is on a route, and every route can be dispatched at once.

Our strong response to this winter's storms involved the first deployments of our new BladeRunner 2.0 tech platform, which allows the Department to track every plow and every salt spreader, pivoting resources in real time and delivering for every part of the City.

But no technology, no matter how innovative, will ever be a replacement for the real heroes of New York City winters: the Sanitation Workers. Thousands of people worked 12 hour shifts for a week or more to get the job done. Their work is incredible. It almost seems like they catch it before it falls.

## **FY2025 PRELIMINARY BUDGET**

This tidal wave of change to the collection, processing, and regulation of New York City's 44 million daily pounds of residential and commercial trash is coming amid an extremely challenging fiscal climate. While Mayor Adams was able to announce that thanks to sound management, there will not be a need for an April round of PEGs, DSNY did find savings in order to meet this crisis.

We were gratified and relieved that litter basket funding has been restored, and we continue to replace the old mesh baskets – which give the rats direct access to the trash – with the new Litter Basket of the Future, which is larger, easier to service, harder to misuse, and, if I may say so, a beautiful shade of gray.

This is an example of how our strategic initiatives are able to continue through this difficult time; another is the ongoing roll-out of the largest, easiest curbside composting program ever, despite the necessary elimination of City funding for community composting – although I was glad to hear that private philanthropy has stepped in to keep this program running.

Our core commitments to cleanliness, timely collection, and snow removal are unwavering.

The Preliminary Budget includes \$1.998 billion in expense funds in Fiscal Year 2024 and \$1.88 billion in Fiscal Year 2025, reflecting increases of \$96.7 million and \$20.7 million, respectively, from the budget adopted last June.

The Fiscal Year 2025 budget includes \$1.13 billion for personal services to support a total budgeted headcount of 9,459 full-time positions, including 7,832 uniformed positions and 1,627 civilian positions, and \$756.5 million for other than personal services, or OTPS.

DSNY's Fiscal Year 2025 Preliminary Budget includes \$3.36 billion in capital funding in the 10-year plan, \$1.18 billion of which is for garages and facilities, \$2.1 billion for equipment, \$64.9 million for IT, and \$49.2 million for solid waste management infrastructure.

The Capital Budget includes funding for several major facilities projects, including:

- \$487 million in funding for the construction of a new garage for Bronx Districts 9, 10, and 11, with demolition;
- \$283 million in additional funding for the construction of a new garage for Queens District 1, which is slated to begin next year;
- Upgrades to the facility that serves as the home for the Bronx District 12 Garage, which has an overall budget of \$55.5 million and will begin construction next year;
- And the \$20 million finishing touches of the \$213 million build out for the brand-new home for Staten Island District 3, which is slated to be completed next Spring.

On the topic of facilities, I also want to provide an update on a topic that has been of interest to this Council in the past. DSNY has completed the installation of women's restroom and locker rooms at all Department facilities citywide.

If you remember nothing else from today's hearing, remember this: despite deep fiscal challenges, 10,000 members of service of the New York City Department of Sanitation are working hard every day to provide New Yorkers with a higher level of service than ever before, to tackle problems the solutions to which have eluded the City for decades, and to run with the opportunities Mayor Adams has given us.

It is an honor to lead the Strongest in this effort; to helm an agency of people who, like me, refuse to accept the status quo when the status quo is mediocrity.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the work underway on our streets, and my staff and I look forward to answering your questions.