



# sanitation

Jessica S. Tisch Commissioner

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

**Hearing before the  
New York City Council Committee on Sanitation & Solid Waste Management**

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**Oversight: The State of NYC Recycling  
Intro. 494 – A Study on Single-Use Plastics**

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Good afternoon, Chair Nurse and members of the City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management. My name is Jessica Tisch, and I am Commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation. I am joined today by Gregory Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Policy and Strategic Initiatives, and Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Recycling and Sustainability. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon on recycling in New York City.

First, I want to discuss a related topic – organics. In just two weeks on October 3, DSNY will roll out weekly collection service for leaf and yard waste, food scraps, and food-soiled paper to *every household in Queens*. The single-largest expansion of a composting program in New York City history, and soon to be the largest composting program the country.

It's also the simplest and easiest organics program we have ever rolled out. All Queens residents – from single-family homes to garden apartments to high-rise condos – will have weekly collection service. Queens residents can check their collection schedule at [nyc.gov/dsny](https://nyc.gov/dsny). The night before your collection day, you can put your yard and leaf waste in a paper or plastic bag or the bin of your choosing. If you set out food waste, you can do so in a brown composting bin or use your own bin with a lid. Order a free brown bin by October 1 at [nyc.gov/curbsidecomposting](https://nyc.gov/curbsidecomposting), or just get a sticker to use your own bin. *It's that easy.*

The best part is that many Queens residents already separate their leaf and yard waste, we're just asking that they put it out on a different day. And separating food scraps into containers with lids will fight rats and help clean up our streets, closing down the all-you-can-eat buffet that has allowed rat populations to thrive.

As I've said before the next time we roll out an organics program must be the last. We have spent the last month laser-focused on creating a successful foundation for this program. We have more than 80 staff daily in the field going door-to-door to educate residents and encourage them to participate. And we've delivered 15,000 new brown bins, with thousands more on the way. I am confident that New Yorkers will participate in this new program.

We are also excited to be working toward another important goal – waste containerization. Today, we have expanded our clean curbs pilot to three boroughs, and we are well on our way toward our goal of having clean curbs installations in all five boroughs by the end of the year.

However, this is a small step toward this goal. We are also advancing a citywide study of waste containerization, funded in the Fiscal Year 2023 adopted budget. We expect this study will be completed in the first half of 2023 and will provide a comprehensive blueprint for rolling out waste containerization in a uniform, adaptable, and scalable manner across New York City. This approach will be a game changer for our public spaces – reducing rat populations, cleaning up our streets and improving the pedestrian experience in our neighborhoods.

Now I'll turn to the topic of today's meeting – recycling.

First, a little background.

New Yorkers have been recycling for more than a hundred years. In the nineteenth century, rendering plants, scrap dealers, and an informal network of rag and bone pickers ensured that most usable discards were given a new life. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the world wars and Great Depression, New Yorkers used and reused products out of a sense of civic duty, necessity, or both. By the 1960s, however, rapid economic changes made products both cheaper and more disposable. Recycling all but ceased to exist. Everything went together into one trash chute – often to an incinerator in the building's basement – or into one trash can at the curb.

Our modern recycling programs were born out of the environmental movement of the 1970s and 80s, beginning with grassroots efforts to collect recyclable products like cans and newspapers at the neighborhood level. The City instituted its first recycling program in 1985, collecting old newspapers in Greenwich Village, before expanding to other neighborhoods and material types. Local Law 19 of 1989 codified the City's mandatory curbside recycling program and is the foundation for the program we have today.

While that program has been through ups and downs over the last 33 years, including a suspension of glass and plastic recycling during the economic crisis that followed 9/11, the program we have today is strong.

Today, DSNY collects two recycling streams: (1) metal, glass, plastic, and cartons in the blue bin and (2) paper and cardboard in the green bin. Last fiscal year, we collected 616,000 tons of these recyclables from New Yorkers, diverting these items from landfill and helping to create new products.

But to truly understand this program and talk about “the State of NYC Recycling,” we have to answer two questions: What actually is recycling? And is it working?

The first seems relatively easy. You “recycle” your soda can when you put it in the blue bin at home, at work or at school. But it’s not so simple. That soda can is not actually recycled until it gets made into a new product – part of another soda can or a roll of aluminum foil. From the time you put your soda can in the blue bin, there are several more steps along the way. Building staff have to make sure the cans and bottles from your apartment stay separate in the trash room and when they’re put out at the curb. And DSNY has to pick it up separately, using dedicated compartments or trucks.

Then, once it has been collected, the thousands of tons of recyclables each day have to be sorted to further separate them into their component parts and to remove contamination – non-recyclable trash that shouldn’t be there in the first place. This separation is a crucial step. The City and its recycling processors have invested hundreds of millions of dollars into state-of-the-art facilities and technology to sort out different kinds of plastics, metals and glass into more than a dozen different categories. This technology includes advanced robots that identify types of plastic and pluck them off a conveyer in a fraction of a second and optical sorters that use machine learning to refine their capabilities over time. It also includes the other end of the spectrum – dozens of workers manually sorting out contaminants before the products get bailed for sale to manufacturers.

Creating these high-quality, low-contamination commodity bales is critical for the next step: sale. Recyclable products have to compete with virgin materials as inputs in the global supply chain. They are subject to the same economic forces that affect the cost of other raw materials, and their value fluctuates alongside the cost of oil and raw steel, with new global trade policies, and with the rising and falling tide of the world’s economy.

Only once the soda can has been separated, collected, sorted, bailed, sold, and remanufactured into a new product can it be truly considered recycled.

The second question is more complicated. Recycling is working in New York City, in that waste products that New Yorkers separate get turned into new products each and every day.

At our last hearing in June, I used the example of paper products, which I’ll repeat here. Thanks to our long-standing partnership with the Pratt Industries paper mill on Staten Island, when you throw a newspaper in your green bin in Manhattan today, it will be barged to Staten Island to become a pizza box sold in Brooklyn next week. That’s recycling at work.

But we can do more. Of all the paper and cardboard in the waste stream, we only capture about 51% of it in the green bin, according to our 2017 waste characterization study. For metal, glass, plastic and cartons, that figure is 48%. That means nearly half of everything that could be recycled ends up in the trash.

These capture rates drive our overall diversion rate. Recyclables make up about one-third of the waste stream. So, with recyclables alone the best diversion rate we could achieve would be 33%. For Fiscal Year 2022, the curbside diversion rate was 17%. But it could be better.

We are working to improve recycling rates in several ways. First, we offer our zero waste building maintenance training program to train building staff on best practices for how to recycle and improve building operations. This program also offers a peer-to-peer network for building supers and porters to share what works in different building types and conditions.

DSNY also conducts communications campaigns on social media and in community media outlets to reinforce recycling messaging and remind residents what *should* and *should not* go in the recycling bins. We work with our partners at DOE to train the next generation of New Yorkers on zero waste practices, including recycling and composting. And we use enforcement as a tool to encourage behavior change and better compliance with recycling laws.

The City is also taking a major step forward in commercial recycling through the implementation of the commercial waste zones program. This will close a regulatory loophole that allowed private carters for too long to refuse to collect recyclables, and we project it will nearly double the commercial diversion rate, from 25% to more than 44%.

### **Legislation**

Now, I'll turn to the bill on today's hearing, Intro 494, sponsored by Chair Sandy Nurse. This bill would require DSNY, in coordination with the Departments of Consumer and Worker Protection, Department of Environmental Protection and Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, to conduct a comprehensive study of new policy initiatives that would reduce the sale, distribution and use of single-use plastic items and advance environmental justice through the reduction of such items.

The City has taken a leadership role on reducing single-use plastic items for more than a decade. In 2019, we implemented a far-reaching ban on polystyrene foam products, including plates, cups and packing peanuts. Given New York City's size and economic position, this ban influenced the larger market and pushed some national brands to phase out foam products entirely. It has since been replicated by New York State, New Jersey, and other jurisdictions around the country.

We have implemented a ban on single-use plastic bags and five-cent fee on paper bags at retail stores, which have reduced the amount of single-use bag waste in New York City. And we are working to implement the plastic straw bill, which we will begin to enforce in November.

Each of these restrictions on single-use plastics has taken effect since the completion of our 2017 waste characterization study. Our next waste characterization study, under way now, will be an important opportunity to evaluate the impacts of these policies to inform future planning. We look forward to discussing with the City Council how to align these studies and reduce single-use plastics.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic and for your continued support as we work to create a clean, safe, healthy, and sustainable City. I am now happy to answer any questions.