



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**

**Wednesday, June 15, 2022
12:00 P.M.**

**Oversight:
Intros 244, 274, 275, 280, & 281**

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 External Affairs, and Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Recycling and Sustainability. Thank you for the opportunity to testify this afternoon on this package of important legislation related to the Department's zero waste efforts.

I would like to begin the hearing by first thanking Speaker Adams, Chairs Nurse, and Brannan, and of course Mayor Eric Adams for prioritizing sanitation services in the FY23 adopted budget. The budget agreement announced last Friday commits \$40.6 million in new funding for Sanitation services in FY2023, including \$22 million for supplemental litter basket collection, bringing us to our highest service levels in history, \$7.5 million for precision cleaning to deploy targeted cleaning resources to clean litter and debris in the most challenging places, \$4.9 million for additional lot cleaning resources for vacant lots and City properties, and \$4.8 million for containerization and rodent-resistant litter baskets.

This is an unprecedented investment in cleaning up our City. I commit that I will maximize the value of this investment in every neighborhood in all five boroughs, and you will see – and smell – the impact of these investments in your districts almost instantly next month.

And now on to the hearing topic today.

In my two months as Commissioner, I've had the pleasure of learning about all the aspects of the Agency, including of course all our sustainability and zero waste programs. This Department is so much more than just waste collection and snow removal; we are at the forefront of the City's fight against climate change.

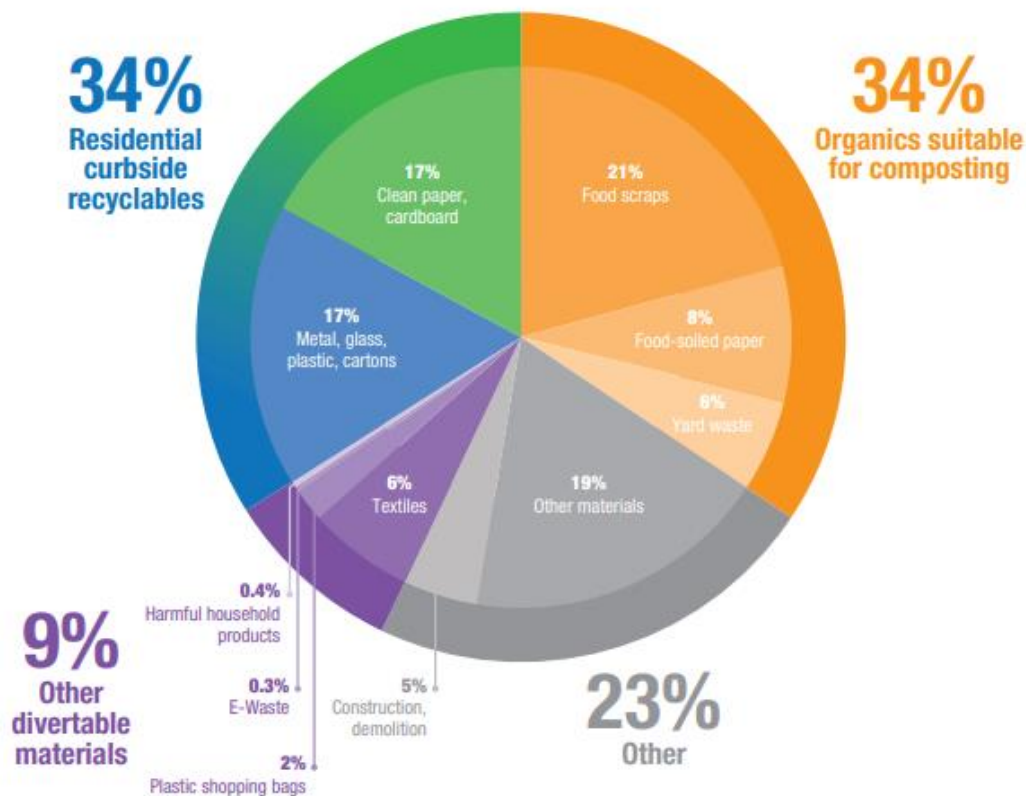
As we should be.

Waste management is responsible for emitting over 1.9 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions per year, equivalent to the emissions from nearly 500,000 passenger cars annually. When you count the global emissions from extraction, manufacture, transport and sale of the products we use in NYC, the impact increases several times over.

We are at a fork-in-the-road moment as an agency with great opportunities and equally large challenges when it comes to zero waste. Let me start with the good news—**we know what we must do to continue on our path towards zero waste.** We have programs for every major category of waste from New Yorkers. I’ve included in my testimony a chart from our last Waste Characterization Study that shows what makes up our waste stream. The Mayor’s Executive FY23 budget includes funding to conduct a new study that will help us make better decisions with the latest waste trends from New Yorkers, especially coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are excited to begin our new Waste Characterization Study this summer, with the full report expected to be finalized in 2024.

NYC Residential Waste Profile in 2017

2017 Composition of Residential Curbside Aggregate Discards



Zero Waste Programs

First, let me talk about our longstanding residential program for curbside recyclables that include metal, glass, plastics, paper, and cardboard. These materials represent about a third of the waste stream. This is our most successful diverting initiative. We recycle about 690,000 tons every year, with a capture rate of about 51% for paper and cardboard, and 50% for metal, glass, plastic and cartons.

Our curbside recycling program has been around for more than thirty years, and over time it has adapted to the changing nature of the waste stream. As a result of investments in local processing infrastructure and facilities, we have weathered the past few turbulent years in recycling markets, as other cities and towns across the country suspended or cut back on curbside recycling.

It's amazing that a newspaper that you throw in your green bin in Manhattan today will be barged to Staten Island to become a pizza box sold in Brooklyn next week. This is the beauty of recycling – products can live a new life, time after time. We are working to create a more self-sustaining city, and the underpinning of a successful program is that it is full circle. But a fifty percent capture rate is simply not good enough.

Next, are the many programs we run to capture organic waste, which is the most significant contributor of waste-related greenhouse gas emissions. This material also makes up 34 percent of the current waste stream – 46 million pounds a week. It represents a significant opportunity to reduce emissions from landfilled waste by diverting this material for composting and anaerobic digestion, and in the case specifically of food waste, by minimizing it at the source. We currently have a multi-pronged approach to divert this waste from landfill, including:

1. **Smart Bins:** Last fall, DSNY rolled out a pilot of 20 Smart Bins, unstaffed, controlled-access food scrap drop off sites, in Astoria. That pilot has been a great success, with bins filling up daily. We are excited to expand this program with more than 100 bins at school locations this fall, allowing students, their families, and members of the community to drop off their food scraps and taking advantage of existing school organics service. We also plan to add more bins to build out the Astoria network this fall.
2. **Food Scrap Drop-off sites:** This year, the Department doubled funding to support community compost partners and community-hosted food scrap drop-off sites from \$3.5 million to \$7 million annually. Today, our partners operate 223 food scrap drop-off sites citywide, including at least one in each community district. In April, the Adams Administration baselined this additional funding, ensuring these sites will continue to serve as valuable educational tools and diversion points for food waste.
3. **School Organics:** Our young New Yorkers are our future, and it's important that we encourage them to learn good habits and principles from the start. That's why we are working with the Department of Education to expand organics collection to every NYC public school over the next two years. It is important that we get this right, and

we are investing in intensive outreach and education as we roll out the program to the remaining schools. We are not reinventing the wheel – more than 600 schools already participate, some for nearly a decade. We will work with principals, custodians, food service workers, teachers, classroom aides, and students to ensure the right systems are in place and that they work.

4. Curbside Organics Program: This Administration took the wise step of pausing the ineffective, inequitable, and over-complicated “opt-in” curbside organics program at the beginning of the year. As I mentioned last month, this Administration is committed to making strides on organics, but we can’t throw good money after bad. I am in just my second month at the helm of this agency, and I am taking a deep dive into our past programs – what has worked and what hasn’t. With this foundation, I am working with OMB, City Hall, the City Council and our dedicated community partners to develop a curbside organics program that people actually use and that is both effective and cost-effective.

The last category of zero waste programs we run targets the 9% of materials in our waste stream that are suited for reuse or require some form of specialized disposal or care. These materials include harmful household waste such as paint and other chemicals, as well as electronics. The Department has several programs to help New Yorkers safely and sustainably divert these products, including drop-off sites, events, and curbside and apartment-building collection. But these programs are hard to understand and often inconvenient to access. I am committed to streamlining these services, so they are as easy to use as curbside trash and recycling collection.

Those are the programs that we have to divert waste, but DSNY’s approach to sending less waste to landfill is not just diversion—we also facilitate donations and events for New Yorkers to swap unwanted clothing, furniture and other products. Our DonateNYC portal helps individuals and organizations give goods and find goods. By donating and reusing goods instead of discarding them, New Yorkers can greatly reduce waste, conserve energy and resources, save money, and help provide jobs and human services for New Yorkers in need. DonateNYC also provides vital support for New York City’s reuse community, helping nonprofit organizations and local reuse businesses increase and promote their reuse efforts.

Now, I did mention some challenges that come with our zero waste programs. The first issue can be seen in the pie chart I mentioned earlier – notably the 23% of items that are not recyclable in any way. What that means is even if we captured every single item that could be diverted from landfill from the categories of our waste profile, we’d still only reach a diversion rate of 77%.

Addressing this 23% will take much more than just the Department of Sanitation. We’re talking about changing consumer behavior and forcing drastic production innovations or packaging restrictions on producers. For some products, disposal is unavoidable, and we must look to technology advancements to extract energy from waste rather than just send it to landfill.

We also must take steps to reduce waste at the source, including by making manufacturers, not municipalities, responsible for the products they manufacture and sell. Extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs are an important tool in our toolkit. So far, the State EPR program

for electronic waste has funded electronics collection programs across the state and diverted millions of pounds of valuable – and hazardous – materials. A program for paint rolled out last month, and a bill to create EPR for carpet awaits the Governor’s signature.

This session, we were strong advocates alongside the City Council for EPR bills for packaging and paper products, which would have unlocked a major new revenue stream to support recycling in NYC and forced manufacturers to rethink the way they make and sell products. I was disappointed that this bill did not pass this year, and I hope we can have productive conversations this summer and fall to position us for a better outcome next session.

Before I turn to the bills being heard today, I want to reiterate to you **that reducing the amount of waste we generate, collect, and dispose – and the air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions that come along with it – has been and will continue to be a core mission of this department.** Our wide range of diversion programs are all meant to reduce the amount of waste we send to landfill, saving the City money, conserving energy, and, of course, doing our part to meet the City’s ambitious climate goals.

Legislation

Intro 244 by Council Member Hanif requires the Department to create a mandatory citywide curbside organics program for residential buildings. The bill would further require DSNY to develop outreach and education materials to inform residents about the program and instruct residents on how to properly source separate organic waste.

A few things on this.

First, the Council is correct to be focusing on increasing our diversion rates for organic waste, as this represents the largest, most impactful opportunity we have to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Second, I believe that a curbside organics program must be an important component of an overall organics strategy.

Third, we have to recognize that, to date, less than 50% of New Yorkers have ever had access to a curbside organics collection program. I believe you have to give people voluntary access to curbside food waste collection and allow them to develop the muscle memory of separating out their food waste material before we contemplate mandatory programs. Food waste separation requires complex cultural change that cannot, in its first instance, be strictly punitive.

The next time we roll out a curbside organics program should be the last. We **must** get it right this time. That is an area of my intense focus.

I made it a priority during my first two months as Commissioner to do a review of the previous iteration of the organics program to learn from our mistakes and come up with potential solutions. I look forward to discussing our long-range proposals with the Council in the future.

Intro. 274 by Chair Nurse establishes a goal of zero waste for NYC by 2030. The bill further requires a report and recommendations if the Department determines that such citywide diversion goal is not feasible despite the best efforts of the City.

Though I support and applaud the spirit of the bill and the urgency of the issue at hand, we have concerns with the bill in front of us. The previous Administration set the goal of zero waste to landfill by 2030 in 2015, and very little progress has been made in the seven years since. The citywide diversion rate in 2015 was 17.8%; that number today is only 20.8%. So, halfway through the performance period, the diversion rate has only increased by 3%. We're simply not on a path toward zero waste by 2030 on our current trajectory. Nor do we have enough time left before 2030 for me to sit her today and genuinely tell you I think the goal is achievable.

I do think it's important to be transparent with the progress the Department is making when it comes to diversion rates, including the types of policies needed to get to zero waste. It's why I am supportive of the reporting requirements laid out in Intro 275, also by Chair Nurse. I'm a data driven person. Tracking this type of information will help the Council and the public understand the challenges we face and celebrate the progress made towards a more sustainable City. We look forward to working with the Council to advance this bill.

Intro. 280 & 281 by Council Member Powers would require the Department to establish and operate at least three community recycling centers and three food waste drop off sites in each community district, respectively.

SAFE events and food scrap drop-off sites are key parts of our work to reduce waste from landfill. We also agree with the Council that these events and sites must be accessible to New Yorkers and available throughout the city, no matter where a New Yorker lives. I agree with the spirit of these bills; however, I am concerned about the potential cost to implement Intro. 280. We are currently reviewing the cost and permitting requirements necessary to create a widespread network of permanent community recycling centers envisioned in that bill. On Intro. 281, we have already nearly met the requirements of the bill, and our growing network of Smart Bins should take us there later this year.

I look forward to working with the Council to create a suite of programs that are accessible, equitable, and effective – and ones that New Yorkers use.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on these important pieces of legislation and allowing me time to give you an overview of our zero waste programs. I know we have a lot of common ground and share the same goals to have a clean, safe, healthy, and sustainable City. My hope is that we will work together on these bills and all future initiatives to get us there. I am now happy to answer any questions.