

Why Waste the Future?

Alternatives to the Mayor's Proposed Waste Prevention, Composting, and Recycling Cuts

A Report by the NYC Waste Prevention Coalition
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Executive Summary

New York City's waste management system is at a critical juncture. Waste export costs are ballooning, consuming large portions of the Sanitation Department budget and contributing to the City's current budget crisis. Unfortunately, the Mayor's proposed solution, to save money by cutting waste prevention, composting, and recycling programs, takes the City's waste management system back towards policies the public and its elected representatives had long-ago rejected.

The programs currently at risk form essential cornerstones of an equitable, environmentally sound, and cost-effective waste management system. They represent high paying, manufacturing job opportunities that the City has failed to exploit. They serve as important counterpoint to legislators in Washington and other state capitols who want to limit New York City's ability to export our waste.

The New York City Waste Prevention Coalition¹ is fully cognizant of the dire budget circumstances in which New York City finds itself. The Coalition has therefore developed a series of alternative policy and program recommendations that provide budget savings or revenue enhancements comparable to those sought by the Mayor. **Unlike the Mayor's proposals, our recommendations can be implemented without jeopardizing the development of a cost-effective, equitable, and environmentally sound solid waste management strategy.**

The Waste Prevention Coalition's report, *Why Waste the Future?*, includes four broad categories of recommendations. In developing these recommendations, we have drawn heavily on Department of Sanitation data to help make our case:

1. **Recalculating the extent of the problem:** The Mayor claims that cutting metal, glass, and plastic recycling will save roughly \$51.4 million/year. We have analyzed the Mayor's calculations, and find they overstate the potential savings by nearly \$12 million.
2. **Cutting Costs through DOS Collection Policy Changes:** The WPC has identified four changes that collectively save the department between \$17.5 and \$21.5 million/year.

¹ The New York City Waste Prevention Coalition is a network of organizations and individuals dedicated to promoting waste prevention as the most responsible, environmentally sound and cost-effective means to solve New York City's mounting solid waste problems.

- a. ***Ban the collection of grass clippings*** – Each year, New Yorkers discard more than 78,000 tons of grass clippings. Encouraging leave-it-on-the-lawn programs could save the City \$7-10 million/year.
 - b. ***Eliminate work rules which create inefficient collection routes*** – Current work rules require collection crews to stay with certain geographic boundaries. Eliminating these rules would lead to more efficient routes, cutting the city’s waste and recycling collection costs.
 - c. ***Eliminate extra waste collection pickups*** – More than 10 years ago, the city added additional collection routes to handle recyclable materials. No changes were made in the number of trash collection pickups city residents received, despite the fact that recycling captures a significant portion of the waste stream in many neighborhoods. (Estimated savings = up to \$9.3 million/year)
 - d. ***Expand dual bin truck use*** – DOS claims they make use of dual bin trucks in all neighborhoods where they make economic sense. This doesn’t appear to be the case, as we estimate that many additional neighborhoods could benefit from their use (Estimated savings = \$1.2-2.2 million/year)
3. **Raise revenue:** Additional revenue can be raised from two different sources, totaling between \$4.5 and \$13.9 million/year.
- a. ***Fee on CFC removal services*** – To help NYC comply with federal Clean Air Act guidelines, DOS crews make two separate visits to drain CFCs from and then collect unwanted air conditioners and refrigerators. DOS should follow the lead of other communities by imposing a small handling fee for this service. (Estimated revenue = \$2.9 million/yr)
 - b. ***Increase amount of recycling violations and expand size of enforcement force*** – Because failure to recycle imposes a cost burden on the City, we need to do a better job at helping residents take the recycling rules seriously. Increasing the total number of enforcement agents and increasing the size of a recycling violation will improve compliance and raise between \$1.6 and \$11 million/year.
4. **Invest in recycling infrastructure:** Although these ideas require a longer term view, there is clear-cut evidence that City investments in recycling processing and manufacturing capacity can have a sizable payback:
- a. ***Build a publicly owned MRF*** – A Columbia University study estimates that NYC could save over \$20 million per year by building a publicly owned recyclables sorting facility. Westchester County’s publicly owned MRF operates at a slightly higher cost, but is still substantially cheaper than the private companies proposing to handle NYC’s recyclables.
 - b. ***Promote recycling business development*** – The Visy paper mill on Staten Island stands out as a recycling business success story, so it’s both surprising and unfortunate the City hasn’t tried to replicate this success targeting other recyclable materials.

The fact that recent DOS managers have saddled the City with a costly and seriously flawed waste export plan should not mean that we simply walk away from waste prevention, composting, and recycling programs because they’re not as cheap as we would like.

Let’s fix these programs – don’t kill them!