

CASE STUDY

BALTIMORE FARMERS' MARKET FOOD SCRAP DROP-OFF



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The City of Baltimore has pledged to reduce commercial food waste by 50 percent and residential food waste by 80 percent by 2040. Composting and other food scrap recycling is an important element of any food waste reduction strategy. In even the most food waste-conscious homes, there will likely be apple cores, coffee grounds, and banana peels that are not eaten. Not only does composting divert waste away from landfills and reduce methane emissions, but it can create new jobs, engage residents while encouraging them to personally invest in reducing food waste, and generate a beneficial product that improves soil health and supports local farms.

FOOD SCRAP DROP-OFF POINTS MAKE COMPOSTING ACCESSIBLE

However, composting—which involves managing food scraps and other organic material to decompose into an organic soil amendment—can be difficult in urban areas.

People who live in apartments may not have backyards or live near a community garden, may not be able to afford a compost pickup service, or may be unsure about what can be composted. That's where food scrap drop-off points come in. The Baltimore Office of Sustainability (BOS) currently has drop-off locations at the 32nd Street Farmers' Market

and the Baltimore Farmers' Market and Bazaar. "Our Farmers' Market collection program is the most interactive composting project we have going right now," says BOS Food Matters Fellow Sophia Hosain. "It serves as a great point of connection to help residents troubleshoot their sorting methods or contextualize why composting is important to set our city up for climate resiliency."

The Baltimore Farmers' Market and Bazaar is the largest market in Baltimore. Centrally located, it runs from April to December and draws around 8,000 customers each week, making it an ideal location for a food scrap drop-off point. This farmers' market is managed by the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts (BOPA), which has cultivated longstanding relationships with the vendors. BOPA was eager to build an accessible composting program at the market and partnered with BOS and the NRDC Food Matters team to launch the initiative. After several months of planning, the first food scrap drop-off site opened in May 2019 at the downtown market. The second site opened in November 2019 at the year-round 32nd Street Farmers' Market, which is managed by a local nonprofit.

At the Baltimore Farmers' Market and Bazaar, BOPA provides staff support for program logistics as well as materials such as a table and tent, and BOS staffs the booth each week, answering questions and monitoring the food scrap collection. Leveraging their relationships with vendors, BOPA formed partnerships with two pig farmers and one vegetable farmer to haul the food scraps away each week, for pig feed and composting, respectively. Residents are asked to sort their compostable materials by what is suitable for pig feed and what is suitable for composting, and staff members are on-site to assist.

At the collection sites, residents have a chance not only to ask questions of the BOS staff but to meet the farmers who directly benefit from the food scrap collection program. Staff members interact with around 200 residents each weekend at the two locations and use that time to provide continuing education on food waste prevention strategies.

PARTNERING WITH FARMERS AND LOCAL VENDORS

Creating these drop-off points has injected food scrap recycling into the typical food shopping experience, allowing residents to see—and almost literally reap—the benefits of diverting food waste away from the landfill and back to farms. The program facilitates a natural cycle: vegetables grown in compost-fertilized soil and animals raised on food scraps arrive at the farmers' market; residents purchase those goods and save their scraps after eating; food scraps are brought to the farmers' market and returned to the farms, where they provide fodder for the next crop.

The farmers who receive the food scraps have been very happy with the program. According to Baltimore County farmer Jen Pahl, "The customers and the farmers are benefiting from the food scrap program. I've had a boost in sales because people want to purchase and eat pork from pigs that are eating the food scraps that they've brought to the market." It's good for business, but, as Pahl says, "It's helping the pigs too. Especially through the winter, they're getting more of the fruits and vegetables that you normally would get only in the spring and summer."

THE PROGRAM CONTINUES TO GROW

The food scrap drop-off program started small but grows every week. The first weekend, the program collected only about 15 pounds of food waste and organic materials. Now, between the two locations, the program collects between 900 and 1,200 pounds of compostable material each weekend. That amounts to around 25,000 pounds of food waste turned into compost or pig feed since May 2019—waste that would otherwise have ended up in the landfill. "As this number has been steadily increasing," Hosain says, "we hope to build more relationships with farmers to ensure the food scraps are upcycled as animal feed or soil amendment."

Over time, the City of Baltimore plans to expand the program to additional drop-off points and make composting accessible to even more residents across the city.