

CASE STUDY

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN BALTIMORE

## SUSTAINABILITY EFFORTS MUST INVOLVE THE PUBLIC—ESPECIALLY IN REDUCING FOOD WASTE

Community engagement is a crucial element of any regional sustainability plan. The Baltimore Office of Sustainability (BOS) takes this mandate seriously; its department goal is to “advocate for a sustainable and resilient Baltimore . . . while engaging, educating, and motivating all sectors of Baltimore.” BOS seeks to work with local residents, businesses, and other stakeholders in every facet of their work.

In fact, Baltimore was selected as one of two NRDC Food Matters model cities in no small part because of that commitment to community involvement. For BOS, this includes community-led events; participatory governance; and a robust social media presence to inform residents about programming, policy updates, and the city’s general sustainability work. There is an annual open house where all of Baltimore is invited to learn about BOS’s initiatives as well as smaller events throughout the city, such as garden cleanups that support urban agriculture.

The Office of Sustainability spearheaded the 2019 overhaul of the Baltimore Sustainability Plan in a process that was a model of stakeholder engagement. To evaluate and revise the city’s sustainability strategy, the agency spent two and a half years talking to thousands of residents about what they wanted a more equitable, sustainable, regenerative, and resilient Baltimore to look like. BOS continues to produce annual reports and seek feedback on its progress toward the sustainability goals outlined in the plan, holding themselves accountable to the community at every step.

In selecting Baltimore, the NRDC Food Matters team recognized that involving local stakeholders and members of the public is especially important when tackling food waste, as many food waste reduction strategies reach into residents’ kitchens and garbage cans. Across the nation, around 40 percent of all food produced ends up in landfills; in the City of Baltimore, about one-third of the trash collected is food waste or other organic material that could be turned into compost or in some cases rescued to feed hungry people. Hunger is a particularly serious problem in Baltimore, with 23.5 percent of residents experiencing food insecurity, almost double the national rate. Faced with serious challenges but



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also major opportunities, cities are well positioned to lead the way on reducing food waste. Through local initiatives and by supporting local organizations, city governments can help prevent food from going to waste, rescue food and direct it to those in need, and facilitate the composting of food scraps.

Working closely with local partners and community members has helped BOS to tailor its strategies, put forth the most effective approaches for every segment of the population, support organizations doing important on-the-ground work, and extend its reach further into the community. The examples below demonstrate that commitment to engaging the public to reduce food waste in a variety of innovative ways.

## THE FOOD RESCUE AND RECOVERY STRATEGY

In 2018 BOS released the [Baltimore Food Waste and Recovery Strategy](#). This citywide strategy for addressing the complex issues inherent in food waste management was built on a commitment to stakeholder engagement. The process of drafting the plan began with a Food Waste Summit that drew more than 75 attendees from a wide range of sectors and culminated in the creation of four working groups made up of government representatives, education leaders, and members of the local business community. Among those involved were teachers from Baltimore City Public Schools, representatives of community gardens and food waste hauling companies, and officials from the Baltimore Department of Public Works.

The working groups discussed what the city could and should be doing to reduce food waste and how those solutions might impact local neighborhoods. Working with local stakeholders helped BOS build a better plan that more accurately addressed real public concerns. The resulting Food Waste and Recovery Strategy draws on the experiences and input of local residents and focuses on how reducing food waste can create jobs, protect the climate, bring communities together, and address food insecurity.

## EQUITABLE GRANTS TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE

Together with the NRDC Food Matters team, the Office of Sustainability is helping local partners in their efforts to limit food waste. With support from the Rockefeller Foundation, NRDC and BOS selected 11 applicant organizations to receive up to \$10,000 each to further their work in preventing food waste, rescuing food, and composting food scraps.

Traditional grant applications can favor larger, more established organizations—those with the means and capacity to fill out long forms and meet rigorous accounting requirements. For this process, NRDC and BOS were determined to work with the community to build an equitable grant-making process. Facilitated by equity consultants from Weav Studio, local organizations participated in an ideation session at which potential grant applicants

discussed who would most benefit from this money and what type of application process would allow smaller groups access to funding. Thanks to robust stakeholder engagement, NRDC ultimately awarded grants to groups such as the Be. Organization, whose Food Playground program provides hands-on, comprehensive, culinary-focused STEM experiences for adolescent girls of color; the Baltimore Compost Collective, a youth entrepreneurship program that provides experience and training in community-oriented composting, and Fort Worthington Elementary and Middle School, which plans to create a composting station at its community garden and provide students with hands-on learning opportunities about food waste.

BOS believes that some of the most important food waste work is done at the local level. Local organizations and leaders understand the needs of their neighborhoods and already have important relationships in place. Through these grants, BOS was able to help fund organizations that are doing boots-on-the-ground work in their own communities, often addressing gaps that a citywide office might not have the capacity to fill.

## FOOD WASTE WORKING GROUP

Additionally, the Baltimore Office of Sustainability created the Baltimore-Food Waste Reduction Working Group, intended to be a forum for interested parties to share resources, connect with one another, ask questions, promote activities, and help build a robust community around the prevention and reduction of food waste in Baltimore. At bimonthly meetings, BOS provides training and education, giving people the skills to facilitate food reduction in their organization or neighborhood, thereby extending BOS's reach exponentially. Upcoming agenda items include a waste sort, a training on food safety, and ways to safely engage in food rescue. The working group has already scored a success outside the meetings: After joining the working group, a Baltimore hospital catering company partnered with a local food bank to rescue leftover food.

## ENGAGEMENT IS AN ONGOING PROCESS

Meaningful community engagement requires meeting people where they are, participating in nuanced dialogue with a diverse array of partners, having culturally relevant conversations, and accommodating different literacy levels and languages. Meeting these challenges is a priority for the Baltimore Office of Sustainability, which plans to continue its work in this area while always looking for new ways to bring the public into the fight against food waste.