

CASE STUDY

LOCAL PARTNERS IN FOOD SCRAP RECYCLING IN NASHVILLE

In 2015, NRDC selected Nashville as its pilot city for developing high-impact local policies and actions to address food waste by preventing food from being discarded, rescuing surplus food to direct to hungry people, and composting and digesting food scraps. Today, the Nashville Food Waste Initiative, led by Urban Green Lab with support from NRDC and the Environmental Law Institute, engages governments, consumers, businesses, nonprofits, and communities, developing and implementing strategies and tools as models for cities around the country.

After maximizing food waste prevention and surplus food donation (as per the food recovery hierarchy), food scrap recycling remains a crucial method for diverting food waste away from landfills. Research from NRDC found that as much as 178,920 tons of food is wasted annually in Nashville, with roughly 67 percent of this waste coming from industrial, commercial, and institutional generators. In addition, research conducted for the Davidson County Solid Waste Master Plan indicated that food and other organics are a significant part of the local waste stream, accounting for nearly a quarter of all county waste destined for the landfill. With the main landfill used by Nashville expected to close within a decade, there is even more pressure to raise the city's low overall diversion rate of just 18 percent.

Part of the strategy of the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI) is to help educate large food waste generators about the potential for food scrap recycling, thereby growing the food scrap recycling culture and infrastructure in the city. Examples and insights from this work to expand local food scrap recycling are included in NFWI's Food Scrap Recycling Landscape Analysis, which drew on interviews with more than two dozen key stakeholders to identify barriers to and opportunities for wider adoption of food scrap recycling practices by businesses. As highlighted in the examples that follow, several local partners are already working to expand food scrap recycling in Nashville, including organizations generating food waste as well as those hauling and composting it.



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WORKING WITH GENERATORS: NASHVILLE FARMERS' MARKET

The Nashville Farmers' Market has a traditional outdoor market, where farmers and vendors sell produce and food, and an indoor market house, which is home to more than 20 shops and restaurants. In 2016 the Farmers' Market and its board updated their strategic plan to make the market more sustainable and a better environmental steward. The earlier version of the plan included strategies for rescuing and donating surplus food from the market's vendors and soon expanded to incorporate plans for food scrap recycling. But at the outset, access to bins for food scrap recycling was available only to a limited number of vendors.

"In this updating process, we made a decision as an organization to take some larger leaps forward in reducing waste at the market," says Tasha Kennard, executive director of the Nashville Farmers' Market. "We eliminated polystyrene foam use, introduced more recycling, and began looking for composting partners. We had several vendors that were already subscribing to compost pickup services individually as businesses. What we were trying to figure out was how we could take what these vendors were already doing and offer it to everybody as a facility service."

As a result of discussions about expanding food scrap recycling services at the Farmers' Market, the Nashville city government and Davidson County (Metro) Nashville Public Works designated the Compost Company, a local hauler and processor of organic materials, as an approved vendor, meaning the Farmers' Market (owned by Metro) could work with the company to redesign and expand the market's food scrap collection efforts.

In April 2018, the Farmers' Market introduced food scrap collection to its restaurants, farmers, and garden center, as part of a larger goal to reach zero waste. One year later, it rolled out food scrap recycling bins to consumers.

"The whole project has helped reduce the city's carbon footprint and also is just a wonderful opportunity to educate citizens," says Linda Breggin, project director for the NFWI. "You go into the Farmers' Market now and everything is either compostable or recyclable. The Farmers' Market ultimately was able to get restaurants on board, because businesses were not going to be able to operate there if they didn't sign up and join in on the zero waste goal. It is a great model for other businesses and organizations."

Kennard reports that the market had sent 200,000 pounds of food to be composted as of the end of 2019, and it is on track to reach 250,000 pounds by April 2020, thus reducing its landfill impact and landfill collection costs. Throughout this process, NRDC and NFWI supported and consulted with Kennard on best practices for food scrap recycling and reducing food waste.

"We would not have tried to achieve a zero waste goal without the work of the Nashville Food Waste Initiative," Kennard says. "Having the network they built made it possible. I am not an environmentalist; I didn't know how to move forward. But the work NFWI and NRDC have done has made these efforts almost plug-and-play."

PROCESSING ORGANIC MATERIALS: THE COMPOST COMPANY

Processing organic materials is a basic element of food scrap recycling infrastructure. The abovementioned Compost Company has been a key stakeholder and frequent collaborator with NFWI and NRDC.

"The culture for composting and food scrap recycling is steadily growing; we're seeing more and more appetite for it every day here in Nashville," says Clay Ezell, co-owner of the Compost Company. "As a city, we're just scratching the surface of what we could be diverting, but we are taking bigger and bigger bites out of the proverbial apple every day."

Partly as a result of initiatives like the Mayor's Food Saver Challenge, a program designed to encourage restaurants to address their food waste, as well as expanding public awareness of the problem, the Compost Company has seen its business nearly double year-over-year since it opened in 2012.

"Most people we talk to understand the value of diverting and want to do it, especially once they realize it's a solution to a waste problem and combats climate change," Ezell says. "Having NRDC here to not just define the problem but [explain] why it's a problem has been huge. Through their research, support, and educational materials, they helped organizations like the Country Music Hall of Fame and Music City Center divert both inedible and edible leftover food that would otherwise have been thrown away. Credit goes to NRDC and Metro for bringing those issues to light."

The Compost Company serves many of the larger food waste generators in town. Besides the Nashville Farmers' Market, these include two Hospital Corporation of America hospitals, two Marriott properties, and the downtown Hilton. One of their larger clients is Vanderbilt University, which diverted over 229 tons of organic material in 2019 alone. Some of these clients and connections came from NFWI programs, meetings, or roundtables; others came simply from the steadily growing culture for recycling in Nashville, coupled with outreach efforts by the Compost Company.

"I'm thankful that NRDC came to town, and I know a lot of other Nashvillians are as well," Ezell says. "Their choice of Nashville as a pilot city helped us gain a lot of insight about the scale of the problem. They helped bring more attention to the food waste problem, not just for those of us who are already passionate about it, but for those who weren't even aware of the issue."

HAULING ORGANICS: COMPOST NASHVILLE

Expanding food scrap recycling requires sufficient infrastructure to haul and process the material. [Compost Nashville](#), a Nashville compost hauling company, is one of a handful of local businesses that work in the organics recycling sector. As a hauler, the company is another key player in growing and building the infrastructure and culture for food scrap recycling in Nashville.

“Overall, I think Nashville is moving in the right direction with composting and being more environmentally focused, which is exciting,” offers Matthew “Beadle” Beadlecomb, operations manager and co-founder of Compost Nashville. “It’s been great having the mayor’s support, especially through the [Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge](#), both for our restaurant community and also for our business. We’ve seen huge growth from that alone.”

Compost Nashville offered a discount to participants in the Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge, and as they came on board, many took advantage of the discount. Between January and July 2017, the period of the initial pilot challenge, Compost Nashville’s monthly volume of business nearly doubled, from 27,000 pounds to 52,000 pounds. It currently serves about 70 businesses around Nashville, as well as about 900 residential accounts. About 70 percent of the food waste it diverts comes from restaurants.

“Compost Nashville has been a great partner and contributor to the Nashville Food Waste Initiative’s projects,” Breggin emphasizes. “In order for many businesses and households to divert food waste, they need someone to pick up their food scraps. Without Compost Nashville doing this important work, we wouldn’t have been able to make the progress we have made on food scrap recycling.”

“We’ve been very lucky to have support from our city and from NRDC and the NFWI,” Beadlecomb said. “Just having them around has been fantastic, knowing the staff and resources are there if we need them. They’ve inspired us and helped us do the work ourselves rather than just come in and do it themselves. They believed in us, and I’m appreciative of their work here in town.”

“People like Clay and Beadle and their businesses are vitally important to keeping this work going,” Breggin says. “They are doing the everyday, on-the-ground work to keep food out of our landfills. It’s through their hard work and dedication that we’re able to keep moving forward on addressing food waste as a city, a state, and a country.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[NRDC: Estimating Quantities and Types of Food Waste at the City Level](#)

[NFWI’s Food Scrap Recycling Landscape Analysis](#)

[The Nashville Farmers’ Market Helps Customers Recycle Food Waste](#)

[WTVF: The Compost Company helping Nashville businesses go ‘zero waste’](#)

[The Compost Company](#)

[Compost Nashville](#)

[Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge](#)

[Video: Clay Ezell - IMPACT - Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge Press Conference \(2018\)](#)

[Video: Matthew Beadlecomb - EASY - Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge Press Conference \(2018\)](#)