

CASE STUDY

NASHVILLE'S RESIDENTIAL FOOD SCRAP RECYCLING DROP-OFF PROGRAM

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.

In Nashville, food waste is the largest component of the city's solid waste stream. And with the landfill that Nashville primarily relies on expected to reach capacity within a decade, the city is actively seeking ways to divert food waste away from the landfill.

“Nashville does not currently provide curbside pickup of organics, as do many larger cities in the United States,” says Linda Breggin, project director for the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI). “Until recently, that left only a couple of options for people who wanted to recycle food scraps: Either compost them on their own, which for some people is not really an option, or pay someone to pick up their food scraps and recycle them.”

Fortunately, Breggin notes, the city recently took action and now provides residents with a new option—food scrap drop-off locations. Planning started in early 2017, when Metro Nashville Public Works began internal discussions about placing food scrap bins at its “convenience center” locations throughout Davidson County, where residents were already dropping off residential trash, recyclables, hazardous materials, and bulky items such as mattresses and appliances free of charge. According to Sharon Smith, assistant director of Nashville Public Works, conversations about increasing municipal recycling options for food scraps was inspired by the launch of an NFWI project, the Mayor's Food Saver Challenge, an effort to partner with local restaurants to reduce the amount of food wasted at Nashville eateries.



“Coinciding with the Food Saver Challenge, we thought about having a place where not just restaurants but residents and small businesses could recycle organics,” Smith says. “We started chatting about offering a public food scrap drop-off location, and then the conversation moved to offering two: one near downtown and one to serve an area farther away.”

Public Works piloted drop-off food scrap bins at two convenience centers in the [fall of 2017](#), and by early 2018 this offering had expanded to all four convenience centers across the county. “There’s nobody else in the state of Tennessee doing this, and I attribute our efforts to that initial conversation, which began with the research and recommendations put together by NRDC,” Smith says. To date, Public Works has collected “a few hundred tons” of food scraps.

Residential food scrap recycling is a foundational part of changing the larger culture as Nashville works toward achieving a [zero waste goal](#). Smith credits the work of NRDC and the Nashville Food Waste Initiative in initiating this change in the first place.

“The work they did really moved Nashville ahead on organics awareness and diversion as much as 10 years. Five years ago, there was a small conversation about food waste; but now it’s become so much more prevalent and so much more of an issue people are talking about. I can never thank them enough. They really started a conversation that would have been hard for Public Works to get as much attention around.”

Smith’s advice for other cities hoping to launch similar initiatives is to facilitate conversation in the community about food waste and start with a manageable change that can affect diversion. “The most important thing is to do something, even if it’s small,” she said. “Even if it’s one residential drop-off location. Start with one thing and grow it from there. You start to get a trickle-down effect, and then you think, ‘well, what else can we do?’”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

[Nashville’s Waste and Recycling Characterization Study](#)

[NFWI Food Scrap Recycling Landscape Analysis](#)

[Metro Public Works Master Plan Presentation](#)

[Mayor’s Food Saver Challenge](#)