

CASE STUDY

WORKING WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT: NASHVILLE'S ZERO WASTE MASTER PLAN



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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.

The state of Tennessee requires counties to have 10-year solid waste management plans. For Nashville and Davidson County, which encompasses the city, an updated plan was put into place in 2007. But among members of the Davidson County Regional Solid Waste Board, says the assistant director of Metro Nashville Public Works, Sharon Smith, there was a feeling that the plan needed an update before it was due to be reviewed again in 2017.

“The original plan was just to do an aggressive waste reduction plan,” Smith says. “But a lot had changed over the course of the planning period, and the best thing to do was to take a look at the plan again. We were keeping in mind that the Middle Point Landfill that Nashville uses was likely going to close within the next planning period and concluded that it would be better for us to have a longer-term, more strategic plan beyond simply the 10-year requirement.”

In 2016, while these conversations were happening, Mayor Megan Barry convened the [Livable Nashville Committee](#), a group of leaders from the city’s public, private, environmental, academic, and philanthropic sectors. The committee was tasked with developing a vision for the city of Nashville to live more sustainably and become a better environmental steward.

A Waste Reduction and Recycling Subcommittee was formed to find and recommend ways for the city to reduce waste. Linda Breggin, project director for the Nashville Food Waste Initiative (NFWI), acted as co-chair of the subcommittee, which included other community and business leaders. Part of their scope was to address the city’s low (18 percent) diversion rate from landfills and make recommendations for ways to divert more.

“The waste reduction subcommittee had started to research best practices and was consulting with NRDC experts on organics diversion,” Smith says. “During these discussions we started asking, ‘Why just do a long-term waste reduction plan and not a zero waste plan instead?’”

“Given Nashville’s demographics, our rapid growth, and the impending closure of our primary landfill,” adds Breggin, “it was clear that from a good-government perspective it was time to come up with a new plan. What happened here was really exciting—the Mayor’s Office and the committee supported a zero waste goal.”

The idea of a zero waste plan gained momentum. The [Livable Nashville Committee’s draft recommendations](#), presented in early 2017, included waste diversion goals and recommended strategies aimed at setting the city and county on a path to achieve zero waste by 2050. From those recommendations, Metro Nashville Public Works enlisted a contractor to help it develop a zero waste master plan in a process that included public input and relied on the resources and expertise of NRDC and NFWI, among others. A draft of the master plan was introduced in early 2018, and the [plan was finalized](#) in the summer of 2019 with the zero waste goal included.

Darby Hoover, NRDC’s Nashville Food Waste Initiative lead, notes that it was important for NRDC and NFWI to engage in the master plan process as a mechanism for advancing both organizations’ food waste goals. “NRDC appreciated the opportunity to provide input into the master plan process,” Hoover says. “Nashville’s master plan provides the critical context and momentum for overall zero waste actions and includes several strategies addressing food waste. Since organic materials account for nearly a quarter of the waste going to landfill in Davidson County, addressing food waste must be a key component of any overall waste reduction strategy.”

“Everything about how NRDC worked with us in Nashville was amazing,” Smith says. “They reviewed and provided guidance on the draft of the plan. To have experts on hand to take the time to look through everything meant more to me than they’ll ever know; even just to have that different perspective was incredibly helpful.”

Breggin’s advice for other cities is to make sure to include food waste strategies in overall municipal waste reduction efforts: “If there’s any type of long-range planning going on in the city, it’s important that food waste prevention, food rescue, and food scrap recycling are taken into account and are key components of the plan. Addressing food waste should be incorporated into city goals, contracts, and anywhere else waste strategies are being developed or implemented.”

Smith believes public involvement from the outset has been crucial for the development of the plan, which has received popular support since it was announced. Public Works included surveys and public comment opportunities throughout the planning process. “Don’t try to do this in isolation,” Smith warns. “Include the public at every opportunity because there are people out there who really care about this issue, and if residents don’t feel like they have buy-in, then whatever you decide won’t have the same impact. Make it a public process all the way through.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

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

[Livable Nashville Committee Recommendations](#)

[Davidson County Long-Term Zero Waste Master Plan website hub](#)

[Solid Waste Master Plan: Achieving Zero Waste Executive Summary](#)

[Solid Waste Master Plan: Public Comments](#)
(NRDC/NFWI comments included on pg. 17)