



THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT  
BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN

**BOROUGH PRESIDENT GALE A. BREWER  
TESTIMONY TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL'S  
OVERSIGHT HEARING BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON  
SANITATION AND SOLID WASTE MANAGEMENT  
APRIL 28, 2014**

---

Thank you, Chair Reynoso, for the opportunity to testify today on the City's Residential Composting Program under Local Law 77 of 2013.

When I was on the City Council, I was a co-sponsor of Local Law 77. My support for the legislation stemmed not only from my longtime belief in the need for New York City to move toward a more sustainable system of recycling coupled with waste reduction and diversion, but also from my own experience.

In February 2012, I had the privilege to work with parents from eight District 3 public schools on the Upper West Side to pilot the Food Waste Composting Program. The concept was simple: instead of throwing away organic wastes such as unfinished food into the same trash cans as plastic wrappers and Styrofoam trays, why not collect what can be composted into a separate waste receptacle? At the same time, Styrofoam trays were replaced with the biodegradable counterparts made from sugar cane fiber. The pilot was a resounding success—450 pounds of food waste was diverted from landfills *per day*, and in just four months, more than 2,000 Styrofoam trays were eliminated from the waste stream. This translated to an overall garbage volume reduction of 85% across the eight schools between February and June 2012. In fact, the program was so successful that the Department of Education expanded the program into 20 schools the following school year, and subsequently replicated the same model in schools throughout the City.

I would be remiss if I don't mention the true heroes behind this effort. The parents: Emily Fano, Pamela French, Lisa Maller, Jennifer Prescott, and Laura Sametz; the cafeteria staff; and the school custodians. Without them, there would be no pilot program. These are the people who arranged for composting bins to be placed inside the schools, who sort through garbage-binfuls of food scraps everyday to take out anything that would contaminate the compost, and who worked tirelessly to ensure DSNY picked up the schools' compost wastes five times a week. I strongly believe that for any school and residential composting program to be successful and sustainable, there must be behind-the-scene heroes dedicated to their respective schools and buildings. So to the Pilot Team that I worked with, thank you very much. And to committee members and the DSNY, I hope this example shows the absolute necessity of community engagement in order for composting efforts to operate smoothly throughout the City.

While I am thrilled that the City is on track to expand organic waste collection to over 400 schools by 2015 as prescribed under Local Law 77, I am concerned with the tradeoffs that have been made between daily food waste collection and metal/glass/plastic recycling collection. I understand that in order to reduce the cost of collection, DSNY has reduced metal/glass/plastic collection from three times a week to just once a week. This is true for at least the schools that participated in the 2012 pilot program. At the same time, with the expansion of acceptable plastics that can now be recycled, non-organic recyclable materials have drastically increased. Since storing these materials for a week can cause vermin problems in schools, this reduction in service has made storing recyclables especially difficult for schools that are successful recyclers, thus providing a disincentive to recycle. I am sure that was not your intent. I urge DSNY to re-examine the collection strategy and consider reinstating twice weekly metal/glass/plastic collections.

Local Law 77 of 2013 established the Residential Composting Program, a pilot for collecting organic wastes in select multifamily residential buildings located along the pickup routes of schools participating in the composting program. In Manhattan, two residential complexes joined the pilot as early participants, and both sites are showing signs of success. In addition to offering regular organic waste pickups, DSNY contributes much to this success by providing composting bins at no cost to households within participating buildings.

The Residential Composting Program's first participant, The Helena, is a 597-unit apartment building located at 601 West 57 Street, has diverted about 1,000 pounds of organic wastes per week, or preventing 26 tons of compostable waste from going to landfills each year, according to the Durst Organization, owner and property manager of The Helena Apartments under Durst Fetner Residential LLC.

Another early participant is Morningside Gardens, a six-building, 980-unit cooperative complex located on the Upper West Side. The complex has achieved a 60% voluntary participation rate among residents, with more anticipated to join after another round of outreach and education that is planned for this summer. Early numbers from the first six months of the pilot shows a 35% rate of organic waste diversion, according to GrowNYC, the program's administrator and technical assistance provider. This means the total weight of trash generated by residents saw a 35% decrease after taking out compostable wastes. This is the result of just under 600 units participating. Imagine how much more organic waste will be diverted from landfills if 300 more units join, and by extension, if additional multifamily residential complexes opt into this program.

Composting not only diverts organic waste from being sent to landfills, it also encourages participants' mindfulness of recycling in general. As a result of participating in the Residential Composting Program, Morningside Gardens has seen an increase in residents' recycling of metal, glass, and plastics—about a ton more per week of recyclables have been collected since the start of the pilot, according to GrowNYC.

I would go one step further and encourage DSNY to think about the significant impact we can have by working out a way to bring public housing into the pilot program. In small measures, this has already reached the realm of the possible. For over 20 years, Morningside Gardens has worked with Grant Houses, a neighboring public housing complex, to make it the *only* NYCHA development in the City that collects recyclables. This is thanks to the ongoing collaboration between Joan Levine, Co-Chair of Morningside Heights Board of Directors and a member of the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board, and Sarah Martin, President of the Grant Houses Residents Association. More recently, Joan and Sarah, as Co-Chairs of the Morningside Heights/West Harlem Sanitation Coalition, are trying to introduce food and yard waste composting at Grant Houses. I believe the Residential Composting Program has the potential to one day include the hundreds of thousands of families in public housing. But this will not happen without resident engagement, and I strongly urge DSNY to place as much weight on providing support for resident engagement as other more technical considerations for the pilot's expansion.

The final example I want to give is a pilot project between DSNY and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, a great illustration of what innovative interagency collaboration can achieve. In January of this year, DOHMH partnered with DSNY to pilot a one-block composting program among residents living on West 83 Street as an effort to reduce rat activities. By encouraging residents to dispose organic wastes in DSNY-issued compost bins, DOHMH hopes to reduce the amount of food scraps in regular trash bags, cutting off a key food source for rodents. Though still too early to gauge the program's success, the pilot has since expanded into two more sites in the Lower East Side and in Washington Heights, showing that there is interest from both agencies and from community residents to explore additional benefits to composting.

In order to maintain success of the City's composting program as it expands, I urge DSNY and other implementing agencies to be mindful of four important things:

First, I must underscore the important role that education plays in the successes of both the District 3 school pilot program and of the Residential Composting Program under Local Law 77. In working with school staff and parents, partnering with community groups such as the Lower East Side Ecology Center and Upper West Side Recycling, and speaking with residents, the common theme emphasized by all of these stakeholders is the need for comprehensive and easy to understand information to guide participants through the initial learning curve of adapting to a new way of waste management. I commend DSNY for posting a variety of educational materials on its website. However, only the "Compost Made Easy" resource guide is bilingual in English and Spanish. I urge DSNY to make all educational materials on composting available in the six languages under NYC's Language Access Plan.

Second, as I pointed out earlier, numerous schools have had the frequency of their metal/glass/plastic recycling pickups decreased in order to accommodate the additional daily pickups of organic waste. I see the expansion of the composting pilot program as an opportunity to restore these schools' metal/glass/plastic collections to their previous

level. I encourage DSNY to begin dedicating trucks to only collecting organic wastes without reducing their capacity to collect other recyclables, as the number of locations in need of organic waste pickup will have increased enough with the expansion of the Residential Composting Program to warrant their own collection routes.

Third, I look forward to this June, when DSNY will report its first findings on the total amount of organic waste diverted during the previous six-month period from households and schools that participated in such pilot programs during the entirety of such six-month period. Pursuant to my Open Data Law, DSNY should make publicly available any data collected in relation to Local Law 77. As the program continues to expand, it is important to know who is participating, the percentage of organic wastes diverted as well as their total tonnage, the costs of organic waste collection, and where and how the collected organic wastes are either being composted or processed in another manner. All of this information should be easily accessible from DSNY's website.

Finally, I urge DSNY to continue to explore local siting options to increase NYC's capacity to process organic wastes. The City can only realize the full benefits of composting if there is sufficient local infrastructure to accommodate current and future processing needs. The environmental benefit of diversion is diminished if a large portion of organic wastes continues to be hauled to upstate or out of state for processing. Furthermore, in anticipation of added organic wastes from commercial entities when Local Law 146 of 2013, known as the Commercial Organics Law, comes into effect in July 2015, it is imperative for the City to start establishing a pipeline of future food-waste and/or other organic waste processing sites now. I am requesting the City Council to pass a resolution to form a siting task force among the City's five Solid Waste Advisory Boards (SWAB) so that appropriate organic waste processing sites may be identified by January 2015.

The SWAB is an ideal and capable body to establish a task force for the identification of organic waste processing sites since it has much of the information required for determining suitable locations. SWAB also possesses the expertise to propose suggestions on overall improvements to the Residential Composting Program ranging from education, infrastructure and equipment, frequency of pickups, calculating true benefits, enforcement, and monitoring the impact of private commercial haulers.