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COMMENTARY: What Happens to Your Food Scraps?

New York City began enforcing mandatory residential composting on April 1st this year and our city now has the largest curbside organics collection program in the country. On average, NYC residents produce a staggering 12,000 tons of waste every day. But by separating compostable materials – food scraps, soiled compostable paper, and yard waste – we substantially reduce that amount by about one-third, or 4,000 tons. So if you ever find yourself bristling at the need to store your compost or dump it into a collection container, know that you're having a significant and beneficial impact on reducing waste. You may even find, as we have, that removing both recyclables and compostables from your garbage means it takes a lot longer to fill up your garbage can. You're making an important difference.

But what happens to all that organic waste? The City's ambitious program to recycle food scraps from all our residential buildings utilizes both City agencies and private contractors: The NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY) provides free curbside collection of compostable material, which is then transferred to processing stations operated by independent contractors. This material is then both directly composted and/or anaerobically digested to produce biogas.

Transport

The NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY) provides free curbside collection of compostable materials for city residents. They also collect food scraps, soiled compostable paper, and yard waste from smart bins located on the streets and in schools and other non-profit organizations. This collection is organized by Sanitation Districts, which cover the same areas as Community Board Districts (e.g., Sanitation District 7 runs from 59th to 110th Streets and Sanitation District 9 runs from 110th to 155th Streets, both on the West Side). Participation is mandatory, though fines have been deferred except for buildings with more than 30 units that have received more than four warnings. DSNY then delivers all these compostable materials to various transfer stations or processing facilities, which are operated by private contractors.

Processing

Contractors pre-process and decontaminate delivered organic material in preparation for recovery for beneficial use. It would be ideal if all this material could be directly composted, and much of it is (one large composting facility in New York City is located on the former Fresh Kills Landfill site—see below). However, space limitations and compost processing time make the use of composting alone impractical in our city. Therefore, most of our food scraps are digested to produce biogas as well as biosolids that are later used for compost and other soil amendments.

Three companies are contracted with DSNY to operate the processing facilities: *American Recycling*, *Denali Water Solutions*, and *Waste Management*. These contractors have different options: They can compost or anaerobically digest the organics themselves; they can pass on some of the pre-processed materials to the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), which then co-digests the material along with sewage sludge; or they can send the organic material to an anaerobic digester in Massachusetts or another composting facility in New Jersey.

DSNY anticipates future contract awards with these as well as other contractors. New York City has also broken ground on a new Sustainability Hub at Hunts Point that will include new digesters that will enable it to accept and process organics directly from the neighboring Hunts Point Market. When the first phase of construction is completed by 2027 it will be able to accept 250 tons of organics each day. A second phase is now being designed that will allow processing up to 1,000 tons per day, and that could include food scraps from residential buildings.

American Recycling Management operates a Transfer Station, Recycling Center and Food Waste Processing Facility located in Jamaica, Queens. They accept DSNY food scraps and yard waste, primarily from Queens. After processing, these are sent to various facilities throughout NY State and turned into compost.

Denali Water Solutions has two contracts with DSNY to receive food scraps and yard waste from different parts of the city. One contract is for the Metropolitan Transfer Station in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx (which mainly accepts organics from the Bronx). The organic material processed at the Metropolitan Transfer Station, including food scraps, is sent to a variety of destinations to either be converted into compost or anaerobically digested, likely in the Massachusetts facility mentioned above. The other contract is for the Court Street Transfer Station in Brooklyn's Red Hook section, but it hasn't yet started receiving organic material.

Denali also operates the 33-acre Staten Island Compost Facility on the former Fresh Kills Landfill site for DSNY. This facility has been processing yard trimmings in open windrows for over 10 years, along with some source-separated food waste from NYC households and schools, and it was recently upgraded to compost food scraps from all of Staten Island and sometimes from

Brooklyn. The new facility, which has the capacity to process 60,000 tons a year of organics, features a 16-bay Sustainable Generation BUNKER® processing system with GORE Covers® and in-floor aeration trenching. Composting is done in three phases that include reducing pathogens and compliance with urban air quality standards. The BUNKER system is twice as fast as the old windrow system. Finished compost is marketed under the Big Apple Compost® brand, about 60% of which is sold to landscapers, with the remaining 40% given away to community groups, parks, residents, and others.

Waste Management is under contract with DSNY to operate five organics facilities that process food scraps, soiled compostable paper and yard waste (leaves, tree branches, plant cuttings, soil, etc.). These are:

1. Review Avenue Transfer Station, Long Island City, Queens – to open in 2026
2. Harlem River Yard Transfer Station, Mott Haven, Bronx – to open in 2026
3. Yonkers Avenue Transfer Station, Yonkers, NY – to open September 2025
4. Varick I Solid Waste Transfer Station, East Williamsburg, Brooklyn – now accepting food scraps and yard waste (see below).
5. Flora Transfer Station, Elizabeth, NJ – now accepting food scraps and yard waste (see below).

At both the Varick I Solid Waste and the Flora Transfer Stations, all the food scraps are used for bio-digestion, but all of the yard waste is sent to Natures Choice in New Jersey for processing into compost. In Waste Management's CORE system (which can accept both pre- and post-consumer food waste), food waste is first conveyed into a bioseparator, where contaminants such as plastic, packaging, glass, etc. are removed. The food waste is then liquefied within the bioseparator, passed through a screen creating a fluidized feedstock, then pumped into a blending storage tank to produce an engineered bioslurry. The slurry is transported by tanker trucks to Newtown Creek Wastewater Resource Recovery Facility, pumped into a feed-in station, and then anaerobically digested to produce biogas (a form of natural gas composed mostly of methane).

The Newtown Creek facility, which is operated by the NYC DEP, has eight massive "digester eggs" that handle the food waste from the Flora and Varick transfer stations along with wastewater. Eventually this facility will have the capacity to process 500 tons of food waste daily. It has been converting sludge to biogas by anerobic digestion (without oxygen) for decades and the facility began co-digesting it with food scraps in 2016. About 75% of the organics processed at Newtown Creek become biogas. The DEP uses about 40% of that biogas to power the treatment plant; the remaining 60% is routed to National Grid and used to heat homes in Brooklyn, thus replacing fossil fuels.

The remaining organic biosolids are shipped to various locations throughout New York State and the Northeast. About one quarter of the biosolids are used as compost; the rest are utilized for soil to cover waste in landfills to maintain sanitary conditions, as well as for soil amendments to restore contaminated land (e.g., mining sites). Only 5% of processed organic biosolids are not re-usable and go to a landfill.

Food Scraps from the Upper West Side

Almost all the food scraps currently collected from the Upper West Side of Manhattan are trucked to the Flora or Varick I Transfer Stations for processing. However, this may change as new processing facilities come online.

Sanitation districts correspond to Community Board Districts. Sanitation District 7 runs from 59th to 110th Streets on the West Side. Organics collected from that area go to the D7 Sanitation Garage at 650 West 57th Street (which also accepts material from District 4, in the Chelsea Clinton area below 59th Street) and then to a transfer station. Sanitation District 9 runs from 110th to 155th Streets, also on the West Side. Organics collected from that area go to the D9 Sanitation Garage at 125 East 149th Street in the Bronx and then to a transfer station.

Most of these food scraps and yard waste are currently transported to the Waste Management Flora Transfer Station in Elizabeth, NJ, but at times these organics are sent to Varick I Solid Waste Transfer Station in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Both of these stations produce a bioslurry that is transported by tanker trucks to Newtown Creek, where it is digested for co-production of biogas and biosolids for soil amendment (as discussed above).

Other Options for Your Food Scraps

While most buildings have brown containers where residents can dump their compost, Upper West Side residents can also drop off food scraps at designated locations like Smart Composting Bins or participating Community Gardens.

Smart Composting Bins are located throughout NYC. They are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and are emptied regularly by DSNY. [Click here to find a Smart Composting Bin or food scrap drop-off site near you or find and unlock available bins using the free NYC Compost app.](#)

[West Side Community Garden](#) has weekly public food scrap collection from 11:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. on Sundays. Drop-off is not available if it's raining or the Garden is closed because of snow or ice. Bring your organic waste to the collection point outside the garden gates on 90th Street, between Amsterdam and Columbus (no meat, fish, bones, dairy, fats). [Click here for a list of other community gardens.](#)

The [Hudson River Park's Community Compost Program](#) also has 10 drop-off sites that are open from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. daily. (No compostable bags, utensils or containers, dairy, meat, fish and bone.

[Lower East Side Ecology](#) and [Big Re-Use](#) also operate composting sites, but none are on the Upper West Side.

More Information:

- [City Plans for Organic Waste](#) (pp.128-137)
- [Curbside Composting](#) (DSNY rules, bins, fines),
- [New York awards organics contracts to WM, Denali, American Recycling worth \\$96M](#)
- [New York's Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant Revs up Anaerobic Co-Digestion Project](#)
- [SG Bunker Composting Facility Opens On Staten Island](#) (at Fresh Kills),
- [WM Varick I CORE – Newtown Creek Co-Digestion Project Converting NYC Food Waste Into a Clean, Renewable Energy Source](#)