

# **Sustainable Food Waste Management Planning Common Challenges and Creative Solutions**

A Guidance Document for Local  
Community Leaders

Syracuse University  
Center for Sustainable Community Solutions



New York State  
Pollution Prevention Institute



# Intro

**This guidance document was produced by the Syracuse University Center for Sustainable Community Solutions (CSCS) and the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute (NYSP2I) to highlight common challenges that New York State communities experience while developing local sustainable food waste management programs, as well as creative solutions used to overcome those challenges.**

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. wastes approximately 35 percent of the food that it produces. To address this issue, communities across NYS are developing sustainable food waste management programs to prevent food loss before it occurs, increase edible food rescue activities, and recycle all remaining food scraps. Local leaders and their partners are administering food waste awareness and reduction campaigns, coordinating food rescue networks, establishing food scrap drop-off and

collection services, building composting sites and anaerobic digestion facilities, using finished compost to regenerate soils, and more.

These programs have the potential to generate numerous economic, social, and environmental benefits for NYS communities. Addressing food loss and waste can conserve water and other agricultural resources, create nutritional opportunities for residents in need, reduce costs associated with waste tipping fees, decrease potent greenhouse gas emissions, create materials management jobs, generate nutrient-rich soil amendments, and help to revitalize degraded soils.

Development of a plan is an important first step to ensure your sustainable food waste management program will effectively address the issue of food waste, serve your community's unique needs, maximize beneficial impacts, and can be sustained. However, local leaders may experience challenges while planning and implementing their programs. This document provides solutions that actual NYS communities have used to plan and execute successful and self-sustaining programs. Read on to learn more!



## **Are you interested in learning more about sustainable food waste management programs across NYS?**

Explore food scraps collection programs on [this Google map](#) maintained by CSCS, and find organics recycling facilities, generators of organics materials, and more on NYSP2I's [Organic Resource Locator](#).



## **Are you just beginning to consider sustainable food waste management for your community?**

If so, thank you for your interest in this important topic!

Before reading on, we encourage you to check out this [Toolkit for Building a Municipal Food Waste Strategy](#) developed by NYSP2I.





# Challenge 1:

## Identifying local champions and forming a group of core partners

Sustainable food waste management initiatives are often started by local community members or leaders who are passionate about the issue of food waste, but designing and operating a program that best serves the diverse needs of stakeholders within a community requires the effort of multiple committed partners. Identifying that initial champion and/or building a group of core program partners requires a dedicated outreach and engagement effort and is one of the first challenges that you may encounter in the planning process.

# Solution:

## Look for local champions and partners at environmental, agricultural, and educational organizations, and beyond

Identify one or more local champions who can lead the coordination and organization of the initial planning effort. Then seek additional partners to form a core stakeholder group. The planning and implementation of sustainable food waste management programs is strengthened and enriched by the range of perspectives and talents contributed by a diverse group of local community partners. Consider searching for local champions and/or core partners from one or more of the following: local government (e.g., town supervisor), solid waste department, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Soil and Water Conservation District, farms, community gardens, or environmental advocacy groups. Also consider engaging nearby colleges and universities, schools and youth groups, or nonprofit organizations.

### Local Champions:

The development of Columbia County's Food Scrap Program was championed and supported by members of the Columbia County Climate Smart Community Task Force in partnership with the Columbia County Solid Waste Department. Through this program, residents can drop off their food scraps at convenience stations throughout the county. The food scraps are then managed via an in-vessel composter.

### Core Partners:

The Schenectady Community Compost Project was collaboratively developed by the Schenectady County Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Sustainability Coordinator for the Office of the County Manager, and exemplifies a strong group of core partners. For the implementation of the project, this group established partnerships with the local school district, urban farms, and farmers market to help facilitate the collection and composting of food scraps.

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# Challenge 2:

## Feeling isolated and lacking a support system

As with starting any new initiative, you and your partners might at first feel isolated in your community, even after identifying a local champion and establishing a stakeholder group. This could make the prospects of planning and implementation seem daunting. You might have the need for additional resources, information, and support, but feel unsure of where to seek that outside assistance.

# Solution:

## Join a sustainable organics management network and receive additional support from technical assistance providers

There are established and active networks that you and your partners can tap into for outside support and resources, including professional groups like the New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse, and Recycling (NYSAR3) and its statewide Organics Council. There are also several organizations that provide technical assistance such as CSCS, NYSP2I, and others. Communities who have already launched sustainable food waste management programs are invaluable resources for you and your partners. Consider reaching out to one or more similarly sized communities to discuss their experiential knowledge and lessons learned including pitfalls to avoid, strategies to try, and opportunities to leverage.

### NYSAR3's Organics Council

The council is made up of more than 100 sustainable organics management professionals from across NYS. Council members meet virtually once per month and regularly communicate via a listserv to announce important updates, share helpful resources, and provide each other with peer-to-peer support. A sub-committee of council members also collaborates to plan the annual NYS Organics Summit. For more information, email NYSAR3 at [info@nysar3.org](mailto:info@nysar3.org).

### ILSR's Community Composter Coalition

The coalition at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a nation-wide network of composters at the community scale that work to advance composting across the U.S. by connecting new composters, sharing lessons learned and best practices, and inspiring the development of new community compost operations. More information and resources are available through ILSR's Composting for Community Project.

### Technical Assistance

Organizations including the Syracuse University Center for Sustainable Community Solutions (CSCS), the New York State Pollution Prevention Institute (NYSP2I), and the Center for EcoTechnology (CET) provide technical assistance to community leaders and food system stakeholders interested in developing locally-tailored sustainable solutions to food waste.





# Challenge 3:

## Obtaining seed funding and building long-term financial support

One of the primary challenges to establishing, maintaining, and expanding sustainable food waste management programs is identifying and securing adequate funding. Depending on the type and scale of the program, costs could include staff time, materials and supplies, built infrastructure, equipment, and fuel.

# Solution:

## Apply for grants to fund pilot programs and seek diverse revenues for program sustainability

Specific funding opportunities may be available to support the initial costs of a program, such as pilot projects, while other funding streams will need to be established to maintain and expand programs. The long-term viability of a program can be strengthened by seeking a diversity of funding streams. These may include volunteer support, low-to-no interest loans, grants, philanthropic gifts, crowdsourcing, fundraising campaigns, taxes, fee-for-service, and revenue from product sales. Account for realistic programmatic costs early in the planning process to increase the likelihood that they will be able to be sustained. And, avoid labeling program elements as “free” that actually have operational costs and service value.

**Seed Funding:** The Long Island Organics Council (LIOC) received initial funding through the NYSP21's Community Grants Program to establish The Town of Riverhead Food Scrap Drop-Off Program, one of the first of such programs to be municipality run in Suffolk County. The grant provided LIOC with initial funding for staff time, materials such as bins and signage, and costs associated with outreach and promotion of the new program.

**Funding Diversity:** The Town of Bethlehem's Compost Facility is financially supported through multiple funding streams. Staff time for oversight and management of the facility is partially supported through the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation's Municipal Waste Reduction and Recycling Program (MWR&R). Revenue for the facility and operations is also generated through tipping fees and sales of screened compost. Commercial haulers and non-residents are charged by the yard or ton to drop off yard debris and/or food scraps, and pay by the yard for bagged or bulk compost.

**Annual Fee:** In addition to disposal fees, recycling revenue, grants, and other miscellaneous revenue streams, the Tompkins County Department of Recycling and Materials Management is financially supported by an annual fee of \$80 per household. This fee is used to support waste reduction and recycling activities, including the County's Food Scraps Recycling program.



**To explore current federal, state, and private funding opportunities, including low interest loans and grants, for waste reduction, reuse, and recycling initiatives, check out CSCS's SMM Funding Database.**



# Challenge 4:

## Determining initial program scope and when to begin implementation

When setting out to conceptualize a sustainable food waste management program for your community, it may be challenging to determine how big the program should be. Similarly, it may be difficult to determine how much planning to complete before transitioning into the initial implementation stage of your program.

# Solution:

## Start small, don't get stuck at the planning and piloting stages, adapt along the way, and build upon successes

Begin by planning a small and manageable initiative that doesn't attempt to address all aspects of the food waste issue at once. Small, successful achievements can help to build support for program expansion, whereas a large, unsuccessful initiative can negatively impact support. However, don't get stuck in the planning phase. Thoughtful and diligent planning will increase the likelihood of program success, but not all unknowns and risks can be addressed before implementation.

It is more beneficial to begin mitigating food waste than to only devote efforts to planning. During implementation, continually assess program elements to determine how they are performing. Build upon and expand successful elements, and redesign and adjust any elements that are underperforming.



### Start Small:

The Town of Victor, NY adopted a Bucket Exchange Program as an initial small-scale strategy for sustainably managing food waste. Through this program, local residents can bring their food scraps to the town's transfer station where the materials are then brought to partnering farms in Monroe County for composting.



### Build Upon Successes:

Sullivan County, NY developed a plan for a Food Scrap Recycling Pilot Program where residents can drop off food scraps at any of the County's transfer stations. Initially, the program is only open to residents and the food scraps will be transported to a large-scale compost facility operated by the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency (UCRRA). If the pilot is successful, the County will consider building its own compost facility and developing food scraps collection options for local businesses.



# Challenge 5:

## Effectively communicating with and mobilizing program participants

The success of a sustainable food waste management program is dependent on buy-in and active participation from local residents, businesses, or other stakeholders your program seeks to serve. However, stakeholders are already confronted with navigating numerous day-to-day challenges and, as important as the issue is, food waste may not rank highly on their list of personal priorities.

## Solution:

### Align with participant needs, communicate through multiple channels, and use proven methods such as community-based social marketing

To incentivize participation, consider how sustainable food waste management initiatives could naturally overlap with the goals and priorities of the intended participants. Maximizing stakeholder engagement also requires robust outreach to the stakeholder group through that group's preferred channels of communication. Guidelines for participants should be simple, and programs should be designed in a way that makes participation easy and accessible.

#### Outreach & Awareness:

The Health Planning and Promotion Division of the Clinton County Health Department launched Eat Smart, Waste Less Clinton County (ESWL), a project that aims to increase awareness about the negative health and environmental impacts of food waste, reduce food waste in the home, and establish food scraps collection sites. To reach residents across the County, programs leaders tabled at public events, were interviewed by local news outlets, conducted a media campaign at local shopping centers and through public transportation, developed animated videos, and created social media posts.

#### Stakeholder Surveying:

To gather feedback from local homeowners about a Food Waste Reduction/Recycling Campaign, the Village of Montour Falls, NY mailed a survey in conjunction with water utility bills. Consider similar communication channels in your community that have a high likelihood of reaching your intended audience.

#### Community & Education:

The Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency (UCRRA) communicates to and educates residents throughout the County about food waste and UCRRA's services and programs through informational web pages, e-newsletters, a telephone hotline, guidebooks, social media, composting workshops, documentary screenings, and compost facility tours.



To learn more about effectively engaging priority stakeholders and how to create programmatic components that inspire behavior change, check out EPA's Composting Food Scraps in Your Community social marketing toolkit and Fostering Sustainable Behavior by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, Ph.D.



International Compost Awareness Week (ICAW), coordinated by the Compost Research & Education Foundation (CREF), is an international education initiative to raise awareness about the benefits of composting and compost use. Consider organizing an ICAW celebration for your community as a way to engage other local champions and build support for sustainable food waste management initiatives.





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**Questions about this guidance document can be directed to CSCS Assistant Director, Jesse Kerns, at [jekerns@syr.edu](mailto:jekerns@syr.edu).**

## Syracuse University

Center for Sustainable Community Solutions

CSCS is housed within Syracuse University (SU). Through federal and state grants, CSCS provides outreach and education, resource development, and technical assistance to communities throughout EPA Region 2 to advance resource conservation and sustainable materials management, including food loss prevention, edible food rescue, composting, and beneficial compost use initiatives.



New York State  
Pollution Prevention Institute

NYSP2I is led by the Golisano Institute for Sustainability at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). NYSP2I is a trusted resource for organizations across the state seeking cost-effective strategies for realizing new levels of efficiency and minimizing their impacts on the environment. Its team of engineers and researchers collaborate with decision-makers – small-business owners, manufacturers, community leaders, and municipalities – working to make New York State a national model for sustainability, waste reduction and pollution prevention.

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