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## **Curb to Compost Toolkit.**

### **Americans want to live more sustainable lives. Can governments keep up?**

Adam Ortiz gets asked a lot about composting. As director of the Department of the Environment for Prince George's County, Md., he says residents ask him all the time if the county can provide curbside pickup. "When I tell them we're working on it but aren't quite there yet, they respond, 'OK, we'll do it ourselves,'" Ortiz says. "People are paying an extra \$20 to \$30 a month to have a private contractor come and pick up their little bucket of food scraps."

Prince George's County, just outside Washington, D.C., is no stranger to composting. It runs one of the biggest food scrap operations in the country. For 25 years now, the county has been collecting leaves and grass clippings that it then processes into a trademarked mulch product called Leafgro. In just the last three years, the county has expanded the program to include food scraps. But the public clamor for composting has grown so rapidly that Ortiz says he can't set up a curbside program fast enough. "We cannot meet the demand," he says. Referring to the county's current composting program, Ortiz adds, "We already have a waitlist of 30 communities and institutions."

Ortiz's story is familiar to many city and county officials across the country. Curbside composting programs have doubled in the last five years, from around 100 communities in 2011 to at least 198 across 19 states today. Indeed, according to the U.S. Composting Council, those numbers don't even tell the whole story. In lieu of curbside composting, dozens of municipalities have formalized drop-off programs for residential food scraps, and entrepreneurs offer curbside subscription services that, in some cases, have grown as large as 4,000 households.

Responding to that existing public demand is important, says Ortiz. People clearly "want to live a 'closed loop' or more sustainable way of life," he says. But government is driving demand, too. Last year, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency set a national goal of reducing food waste by 50 percent by 2030. (Right now, 95 percent of the food disposed of in the U.S. ends up in a landfill, where it emits methane and contributes to global warming.) Many cities have also set waste diversion goals. Austin, for example, wants to reduce the material sent to landfills by 90 percent by 2040, and Milwaukee has a goal of diverting 40 percent of its waste from landfills by 2020. What's more, several states and cities either ban food scraps and yard waste from landfills or mandate that they be recycled.

With so many policies in effect calling for composting, curbside programs and drop-off centers are expected to continue growing steadily. The structure of these programs will undoubtedly vary from city to city. Challenges such as upfront costs, siting and permitting new facilities, and resident resistance can shape what a composting program looks like.

Frank Franciosi, executive director of the U.S. Composting Council, says all these barriers can be eliminated by developing a detailed and concise plan with "a good public relations program showing the benefits of using compost from both a horticultural view as well as an environmental view," he wrote in an email.

To that end, the council has [developed a toolkit](#) with guidelines for local governments on how to set up a program, from building awareness to managing program logistics. The council also offers model legislation to help states upgrade their current rules regarding siting and permitting. “Zoning is one of the biggest obstacles when private commercial compost manufacturers want to site and build a facility,” says Franciosi.

As for the added costs for outreach, source separation, signage and additional containers, Franciosi says, “Cities should look at this as an investment for future growth and sustainability. One must calculate the cost of doing nothing against the cost savings of valuable landfill space. What are the costs for increasing methane in our atmosphere?”

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