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## **Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Solid Waste and Sanitation, Oversight Hearing on Local Law 77 – Curbside Residential Organic Waste Diversion Pilot Program**

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Michael Dardia, and I am Co-Research Director with the Citizens Budget Commission. The mission of CBC is to advance constructive change in the fiscal health and efficient provision of public services in New York State and City.

In 2012 CBC began a series of reports examining the cost of New York City trash collection and disposal. These reports found the city's garbage system is exceptionally expensive, costing taxpayers \$1.7 billion annually. Current practices are also environmentally damaging. Most non-recyclable trash collected by the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) is sent to distant landfills, with some trash traveling as far as South Carolina and Kentucky.

CBC has just released a report on the costs and challenges of the city's residential organics curbside pilot program. The report finds the City's focus on organics diversion makes sense; food scraps and other organic material is the largest share of trash after recyclables, organic material creates harmful methane gas when landfilled, and alternative technologies for organics, such as composting and digestion, already exist. However, before any further expansions to the residential curbside program, the City needs to address two main challenges: the cost of additional sanitation collection truck runs and the lack of nearby processing capacity for organic material.

Right now the cost of the residential pilot program is small, about \$19 million over two years. But if the curbside program were expanded citywide, costs would balloon. We calculate the full cost would be in the range of \$177 million to \$250 million per year, mostly to pay for additional collection runs. At this rate the costs would approach as much as the city currently spends to dispose of all trash. Under optimistic scenarios, at least 88,000 new truck-shifts would be needed each year.

Additionally, collections of organic material will quickly exceed capacity to process it. CBC's survey of composting facilities within 150 miles found available capacity of 176,000 tons, or just 10 percent of total NYC residential and commercial organic waste. There are numerous



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anaerobic digestion developments in the works in the region, but most are being constructed to serve other municipalities and customers.

Given these challenges, an alternative technology for food waste diversion – in-sink food waste disposers – should also be examined as part of the City’s organics diversion strategy. This simple but underutilized technology could divert a significant amount of food waste from landfills to some of the City’s wastewater treatment plant digesters without adding new trucks to the road. However, the potential impact of disposers on the city’s sewers and wastewater treatment infrastructure would need to be carefully considered.

Until the City can address the high cost of residential garbage collection and secure adequate organics processing capacity, it should devise a more limited strategy. DSNY and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) should collaborate on approaches that could achieve meaningful environmental benefits without adding new costs. Two possibilities are:

- 1) **Expand curbside collections only where and when additional collection routes are not required.** If participation levels are high enough, the Department of Sanitation could expand the curbside organics collection program while avoiding additional collection routes. This could be achieved by either replacing a weekly refuse pickup with an organics pickup or collecting refuse and organics simultaneously with special trucks with two separate compartments. Achieving such efficiencies would require City Council approval and a significant boost to participation rates. Currently only 1 of the 59 sanitation districts would qualify, but at higher diversion rates as many as 10 could. Operational efficiencies or partnerships with the private sector might also allow for cost-effective program expansions in additional neighborhoods.
- 2) **Consider in-sink disposers in select neighborhoods with adequate wastewater treatment plant infrastructure and capacity to reduce garbage collection.** DEP and DSNY should collaborate to identify neighborhoods where in-sink disposers could be used without burdening wastewater treatment infrastructure and trash collections could be reduced. The distribution of costs for the purchase, installation, and operation of the devices between the City, building owners, and residents would also need to be resolved.

To conclude, as New York City seeks to achieve environmental benefits through wider diversion of organic waste, municipal leaders should understand unless residential trash collection costs are reduced, new program costs will greatly overwhelm any potential savings from landfill



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reduction. A significant expansion of organics collection may also outpace regional processing infrastructure. A targeted and thoughtful approach, including in-sink food waste disposers where viable, could be a way to preserve municipal resources and ensure organics programs are sustainable for the long term.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to provide all the members of the committee with copies of our report.