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Testimony on Getting to Zero Waste by 2030

Submitted to the NYC Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. The mission of the Citizens Budget Commission (CBC) is to achieve constructive change in the finances and services of New York State and New York City government.

On April 22, 2015, the City released *One New York: The Plan for a Strong and Just City*, which set a laudable goal of Zero Waste by 2030—the topic of today’s oversight hearing. The City reports positive progress on all eight Zero Waste initiatives. However, there is a long way to go to achieve a significant reduction in the amount of waste disposed of while ensuring cost-efficient collection and disposal systems and operations.

The eight Zero Waste initiatives are:

1. Expand the NYC Organics program to serve all New Yorkers by the end of 2018
2. Enhance the curbside recycling program by offering single-stream recycling by 2020
3. Reduce use of plastic bags and other non-compostable waste
4. Give every New Yorker the opportunity to recycle and reduce waste, including at New York City Housing Authority projects
5. Make all schools Zero Waste Schools
6. Expand opportunities to reuse and recycle textiles and electronic waste
7. Develop an equitable blueprint for a Save-As-You-Throw program
8. Reduce commercial waste by 90 percent by 2030

In 2012 CBC began issuing a series of reports examining the cost of New York City waste collection and disposal. These reports found that the City’s waste system is exceptionally expensive, environmentally damaging, and inefficient. This testimony reviews the four Zero Waste initiatives CBC has studied: organics collection, single-stream recycling, save-as-you-throw, and commercial waste collection.

First, with respect to organics, which comprise 31 percent of the residential waste stream, it is clear that increased processing represents a major opportunity to significantly reduce the

amount of waste being landfilled. However, the organics program is highly inefficient. It is a voluntary program and participation rates are extremely low. The New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) collected an average of 81.4 tons of organics per day in fiscal year 2017—about 0.8 percent of all refuse collected at the curb.¹ In districts participating in the curbside program, about 7.7 percent of organic waste was collected.²

With low participation, trucks collecting organics are far from full. According to DSNY, in fiscal year 2016, a truck run (which, based on data for refuse and recycling runs, costs about \$3,000) collected less than 1 ton of organic material on average—compared to nearly 6 tons for recycling and 10 tons for refuse.³ In [Can We Have Our Cake and Compost It Too?](#), CBC recommended a slower rollout of the organics program, only to districts that could be expected to generate sufficient tonnage so as not to require additional collection days (either by reducing refuse collection days or using dual-bin trucks).

Additionally, the report recommended the use of in-sink disposers in select districts to divert organic waste from landfills without requiring curbside collection; the City is not actively pursuing this approach.⁴

Second, the City is planning to switch to single-stream recycling by 2020. [Getting the Fiscal Waste Out of Solid Waste Collection in New York City](#) supported the adoption of single-stream recycling, and this switch should be achieved as expeditiously as possible. Increasing the recycling rate is essential for reducing the amount of waste being landfilled. The recycling diversion rate—the share of curbside waste that is recycled—is around 17 percent. In recent years, total refuse tonnage has been flat or declining, and most of the reduction has come from fewer recyclables in the waste stream, which is a positive trend.⁵ However, it also means that a substantial portion of the waste stream remains that is not recyclable or easily divertible from landfills, which poses a challenge for the City in meeting a goal of Zero Waste.

Single-stream recycling encourages participation by making the process easier and is expected to boost the diversion rate. Furthermore, collecting single-stream recycling would improve the efficiency of recycling collections. Currently, DSNY collects an average of 5.6 tons of recyclable material per truck shift at a cost of \$640 per ton (compared to \$282 per ton for refuse).⁶ If DSNY could send one vehicle rather than two (one for paper and one for metal, glass, and plastic) to collect recyclables, it is likely the tons collected per truck shift would increase, thereby decreasing the per ton collection cost for recyclables (however, savings from collection efficiencies must also exceed additional costs of sorting recyclables post-collection).⁷

Third, DSNY has contracted with a consultant to develop a save-as-you-throw program. CBC's report, [A Better Way to Pay for Solid Waste Management](#), supported implementation of such a program. Volume-based garbage fees have been shown to reduce the amount of waste being landfilled, as financial incentives encourage both lower waste generation and higher recycling rates.

Fourth, the City is pursuing a zone franchise system for commercial waste, also by selecting a consultant to develop a program. According to the analysis presented in [Getting the Fiscal Waste](#)

[Out of Solid Waste Collection in New York City](#), such a system would reduce truck traffic and increase efficiency.

In addition, in [Getting the Fiscal Waste Out of Solid Waste Collection in New York City](#), CBC recommended short-term cost-savings measures for waste collection that would require collective bargaining. While these are not part of the City's Zero Waste program, they are timely as the City's contract with the Uniformed Sanitationmen's Association will expire in January 2019. The recommendations include:

- Allow greater flexibility in the frequency of collection, scheduling, and recycling practices, including redesigned routes;
- Expand the use of large containers and automated trucks;
- Eliminate "unproductive" productivity bonuses for tons collected per truck shift and for dumping on shift, which are a function of the route and neighborhood to which a worker is assigned, rather than the workers' productivity.

While the City's efforts are targeting key areas of waste generation and processing, the low rate of participation by New Yorkers and the lengthy implementation schedule suggest that significant reductions in waste tonnage are still many years in the future. Furthermore, the City's waste management system remains inefficient. Some initiatives, such as curbside organics, are more inefficient than traditional waste and recycling efforts, and DSNY should consider ways to make collection more cost-effective, including more immediate improvements achievable through collective bargaining.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on this important topic. CBC staff is available to discuss these recommendations in greater detail.

Founded in 1932, the Citizens Budget Commission is a nonpartisan, nonprofit civic organization devoted to influencing constructive change in the finances and services of New York State and New York City governments.

¹ This figure includes the Christmas Trees, Leaves and Yard Waste, and Food Waste collection. City of New York, Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report: New York City Curbside and Containerized Municipal Refuse and Recycling Statistics* (Fiscal Year 2017), p. 1, http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/docs/about_dsny-curbside-collections-FY2017.pdf.

² Capture rate is calculated as organic tonnage collected divided by 31 percent of the total waste collected (estimate for all organic waste). In certain districts, curbside organics is partially implemented; however, data for the whole district is used. CBC staff analysis of data from City of New York, Department of Sanitation, *Annual Report: New York City Curbside and Containerized Municipal Refuse and Recycling Statistics* (Fiscal Year 2017), p. 1, http://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/docs/about_dsny-curbside-collections-FY2017.pdf.

³ Average truck run cost is based on collection cost per ton for refuse and recycling times the average number of tons per truck run. See: City of New York, Mayor's Office of Operations, *Preliminary Mayor's Management Report* (February 2017), pp. 113-114, www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2017/2017_pmmr.pdf. Tonnage per truck run for organics program based on DSNY presentation reporting weekly average of 342 trucks collecting 294 tons. See: Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner, Louise Bruce, Senior Manager, and Shari Pardini, Director, New York City Department of Sanitation, "From Curb to Compost: How the City of New York is Building an

Organics Collection Program to Serve 8.5 Million People” (presentation to the “Compost2017: 25 Years and Growing!” Conference, Los Angeles, California, January 25, 2017).

⁴ Adrienne Bernhard, “The Case for the Humble Garbage Disposal,” *CityLab* (August 31, 2017), www.citylab.com/environment/2017/08/garbage-disposals-new-york/538581/.

⁵ Daniel Huber, *Ten Years After: Assessing Progress on the City’s Solid Waste Management Plan* (New York City Independent Budget Office, August 2017), pp. 3-5, www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/ten-years-after-assessing-progress-on-the-citys-solid-waste-management-plan-2017.pdf.

⁶ City of New York, Mayor’s Office of Operations, *Preliminary Mayor’s Management Report* (February 2017), pp. 113-114, www1.nyc.gov/assets/operations/downloads/pdf/pmmr2017/2017_pmmr.pdf.

⁷ Tammy Gorman, *Getting the Fiscal Waste Out of Solid Waste Collection in New York City* (Citizens Budget Commission, September 2014), pp. 4-5, https://cbcny.org/sites/default/files/media/files/REPORT_SolidWaste_09232014.pdf.