

Compost Pick-Up/Organics Recycling

Preliminary Resource Paper

Chicago Recycling Coalition

www.chicagorecycling.org



Issue: *Organic matter is a valuable resource that must be diverted from landfills.*

History and Background

Nearly one-third of the waste stream (in Chicago, 29%, as collected by both the Department of Streets and Sanitation (DSS) and private firms) is organic matter—things like banana peels, egg shells, coffee grounds and paper towels, as well as yard waste like leaves and branches. These items can be recycled, in the form of composting. However, the City of Chicago’s own Waste Diversion Study, released in February, 2010, states that only 17% of yard waste is captured by DSS and 19% by private enterprises. These organics are picked up only from April 1 to November 30. Statistics for food waste are horrible—*less than 1%* is collected privately, and the city doesn’t even keep records for these organics.

Why institute a citywide composting program? A household organics waste pick-up program would:

- 1) Reduce the need for valuable and controversial landfill space
- 2) Generate an organic, reusable and potentially saleable product
- 3) Trim costs from tipping fees and transportation costs

Where do other major cities stand on this service? “Garbage can be viewed as a resource,” says Pat Barrett of Toronto’s Solid Waste, which launched the city’s Green Bin organics recycling program in 2002. Toronto, which has a climate similar to Chicago’s, picks up organics weekly year-round, and thus has *reduced its garbage collection to every other week*. Toronto residents have a bin in their house—lined with a plastic bag if they like, for convenience—in which they dump food waste: fruit and vegetables scraps, paper towels, coffee grinds, etc. The items are picked up and transferred to processing facilities that use an anaerobic (no air) system. In addition, they are capturing methane gas to produce electricity and natural gas for waste collection trucks.

San Francisco uses one private corporation, called Recology, to deal with all its waste collection (landfill, recycling and compost). SF uses a three-cart recycling program (black for landfill, blue for recycling and green for compost). To encourage recycling, the blue and green carts are picked up for free, while a monthly fee is charged for the black bin.

State laws are making food scrap composting easier. Illinois started to pave the way for a citywide composting pick-up program when the General Assembly passed SB0099. This allowed for household composting by not defining food scraps as food waste, which eliminated the need for residents to possess a hazardous materials handling license. The state also now allows composting in M1 and M2 zoning districts, which opens up the possibility for more composting centers within city limits.

Chicago Recycling Coalition (CRC) Policy Proposals

CRC wants the city to promote backyard composting to every Chicago homeowner. This will require a vigorous and comprehensive education campaign that could begin immediately. Additionally, CRC advocates decentralizing drop-off composting sites. These could be located at community gardens, urban agriculture sites, park district locations and specially assigned open spaces (perhaps one in each ward). Long-range goals should include a more comprehensive approach to food and yard waste pickup, including special (green?) carts or bins for homeowners and multi-unit residents alike. Composting is necessary and important for gardening, growing food and contributing to a healthy soil system in the city. It can mitigate the presence of lead in soils and can possibly result in economic development opportunities in neighborhood communities.