

FAQs About Urban Community Composting

NOTE: This is a working document reflecting the 7/2013 discussions at the New York City Community Composters' Roundtable

Q. What is urban community composting?

A. Urban community composting is a type of not-for-profit composting that is scaled to fit a community-based context like a neighborhood or college or place of work, and it recycles organic material as locally as possible with as much community participation and education as possible. It is a form of what's known as *decentralized* composting, and contrasts to *centralized* composting that involves city-wide collection of residential or commercial organic material that is transported a distance.

Q. What are the goals of urban community composting?

A. The first goal for community composting is that organic material flows the shortest possible distance in a cycle internal to a community, from the sources to a composting site and then, in a new form as mature compost, to greening projects in that same community. The second goal is to maximize participation of community members, both to help sustain the operation but also to foster individuals' education about and commitment to sustainable practices. Obviously in large urban settings community composting cannot recover all organics, for which municipal and commercial partners are necessary, but good policy dictates that community-based sites should be developed to recover as much as is feasible.

Q. Why is urban community composting important?

A. Urban community composting best promotes long-term values of sustainability for many reasons:

- Better for the environment: Reduces environmentally costly transport by greenhouse gas emitting trucks, because compostables can more easily be processed at or near the source, at the neighborhood level, and without transfer stations, unlike other recyclables in the waste stream (e.g., glass, plastic, metal);

- Better supports local food growing and other local greening projects: Increases community access to finished compost for growing food locally, for private, public, or institutional use (for example, urban farms, home or community food gardens, public school gardens, restaurants), helping to shorten the distance between where some food is grown and where it is consumed, and otherwise supporting local greening projects like street trees, household flower gardens, beautification/maintenance of parks/meridians, and constructing bioswales for storm water management;

- Best promotes public's commitment to all forms of reducing, reusing, and recycling through involvement in just one form of recycling: Increases opportunities for the public to engage meaningfully, because individuals can be involved more in processing compostables than in the other waste streams, and they can more easily see the connection to growing their own food and beautifying their own streets/parks, all of which raises their environmental awareness about the importance of all efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle, not just composting;

- Improves compost: Increases quality of compost because heightened levels of education and environmental awareness, and direct connections to the neighborhood's improved food and beauty, will cause individuals to sort their compostables with greater care and thus reduce the level of contaminants;

- Best builds support for other significant composting programs like municipal residential pick-

up: The heightened commitment and awareness gets us closer to public readiness for the source separation needed for municipal residential pick-up, which may be a necessary long-term partner with neighborhood-based composting in the future picture of sustainable organics recovery in urban settings;

- Can create jobs: Community composting operations without powered equipment depend heavily on human labor, and that may create potential for local jobs.

For all these reasons, municipalities should strive to realize the potential of community composting to the maximum extent, up to the line any particular urban area will allow. Once that line is reached, then it will be easier to identify what will have to be otherwise managed by important partnerships with centralized municipal and commercial organics recovery.

Q. Why is community participation and education a necessary component of community composting?

A. Involvement of community members in the work has many positive features. First, for some sites it may be the only way to get the work done. Second, this type of composting is an unusual opportunity in the recycling world for individuals to create something of value for their community with their own hands. After seeing up close how food and other discards turn into “black gold” for greening their streets, parks, school gardens and urban farms, many participants walk away thinking “how can we not be doing this as much as possible?” Thus many community composters believe their work is the gateway drug to the bigger realms of recycling and sustainability. Working toward this broader goal helps to generate more leaders and helpers in a community willing to give the extra time and effort required for community composting to succeed. Many participants also value the opportunity to build community by forging new relationships at the composting site that can widen support networks and trigger collective action on other issues of concern in the community. And at the micro level, picking through a mass of materials to extract inorganics – like twist ties and rubber bands and stickers – develops a culture of mindfulness regarding source separation for all forms of recycling.

In addition, community participation and education may be instrumental for persuading city officials and foundations that taxpayer and private funds are appropriately spent on community composting, although at the same time it is important for sites also to develop revenue streams to ensure

a diversely solid financial sustainability (e.g., charges for inputs or for finished product).

All this is not to diminish the value of a composting site that diverts organic resources from landfill, with no community participation and education. But to inspire leaders/helpers, persuade potential funders, and otherwise foster a widened stewardship of the environment through all forms of recycling, community participation and education are a necessary component of community composting.

Q. What if feedstock sources are not yet developed in a community and must derive from outside the community, or conversely the feedstock sources are developed but the only available land is outside the community?

A. Community composting is in its infancy, at least at scales larger than average community gardens. There are many obstacles to achieving the goals fully, including regulatory, financial, public education, and operational issues. Further, our cities were not designed to accommodate sustainable practices like composting, so identifying suitable sites can be challenging. Thus community composting will have to achieve its goals over time, and sometimes accept something less than ideal for the time being.

For example, a community garden may easily fit the ideal if it only processes its own organics from within the garden – that is processing “as local as possible.” But other sites allow for diverting much more from landfill, and confront obstacles that mean “as local as possible” may require some interim flexibility, because what is “possible” is not ideal until regulatory, financial, public education, and operational issues are addressed. For example, one site’s feedstock may be derived entirely from elsewhere in the city but otherwise actively promote participation of that site’s neighborhood members and devote the product entirely to greening their neighborhood. Another site may be located adjacent to a community with no available land but otherwise serve that adjacent community on all counts. Yet another site may have achieved all goals except for participation of the community members in the processing itself, yet does general educational outreach to the public. But what all community composting programs share is the aspiration to recycle organic material as locally as possible with as much community member involvement as possible, and work toward that goal over time.

Q. How big is too big for the definition of a community composting site?

A. For now, it may depend. Certainly a city-wide program is too big because by definition urban community composting is looking to close the loop as tightly as possible. But as mentioned in response to the last question, our cities were not designed to make space for fully sustainable practices like community composting, which confronts many other obstacles on the path to success, including unhelpful regulatory agencies and a resistant public. That means we have to make all sorts of temporary adjustments along the path, like taking feedstock from neighboring communities and perhaps getting a bit larger than we would like if it preserves a key feedstock source. But as our models evolve, we need periodically to be reviewing our goals and asking the key questions:

- Are we helping to make sure organic material flows the shortest possible distance in a cycle internal to a community, from the sources and then back to a community's greening projects?
- Are we maximizing participation of community members, both to help sustain the operation but also to foster individuals' education about and commitment to sustainable practices?

At times, as we meet success with funders, regulatory agencies, and with public participation and support, we may have to make some hard changes to better conform our practices to our goals. For example, if through regulatory change a feedstock source opens up in the community we serve that can displace a feedstock that is from outside our community, we have to take serious steps to make a change, keeping in mind the importance of helping the non-community source find an alternate site.

Q. What if the "community" is a restaurant or hospital that separates out food waste and pays a hauler to take it to a commercial composting facility somewhere within the city limits?

A. Assuming responsible practices on everyone's part, that approach may be the most sustainable option available. But it does not aspire to the goal of community composting, which is to recycle organics as nearby as possible and foster participation of community members in the greening of their community.

Q. What about anaerobic digestion?

A. Anaerobic digestion does not produce compost, but instead biogas and a solid by-product called digestate. Digestate might serve as a feedstock for a community composting site, depending on a number of factors including the quality of that particular feedstock.

Q. Can there be a for-profit community composting program?

A. There is no doubt that for-profits can be important partners in the community composting movement, but there is some doubt about whether a community composting program could be for-profit. As important partners, for-profits may be sources of feedstock, or haulers, or funders, or play a support role in some other way. In the world of composting, there are for-profit commercial composters with whom we share and can partner on many useful projects.

But the structure of a for-profit company is primarily for making money for owners or shareholders. That's a legitimate goal. But developments in the business may cause the owners/shareholders to change the direction of the company to suit the bottom line. For example, the company may believe it does better if it expands to serve more or as much of a city as it can. That pushes them beyond community composting's mission of closing the loop as tightly as feasible for a community like a neighborhood. The goal of expansion then aligns the company more with city-wide centralized programs.

By contrast, a not-for-profit is by law bound to the pursuit of the mission under which it was incorporated. Given that community composting is mission-oriented, the fit with not-for-profits seems better. Although not-for-profit groups can – and in some instances should – generate revenue through fees/charges to support their missions, they nonetheless remain permanently bound under law to pursuit of that mission.

In addition, fostering participation of community members is an essential goal of community composting. That goal may be too challenging if volunteers are being asked to work for a commercial venture that is making money for others.

Lastly, collective action will be important for the community composting movement, especially with regard to grantors and regulatory bodies. Municipal and private grantors will often if not always require not-for-profit status. And for-profits will have an interest in pursuit of regulatory reforms that are unnecessary for not-for-profits – work on such reforms could use up a group's time and other resources in a way that causes the group to lose its cohesion.

For all these reasons, there is doubt about whether a community composting program could be for-profit. But others may design for-profits in a fashion that can begin to address the doubt, and the issue can be revisited.