

COVER PAGE

Thank yous

- mentors, TA, graham, fellows
- specific communities I spoke to
- include logos for Novi, EGLE, Graham

Include separate section on communications - gaining interest, communications needs,

Gaps - how can people continue to develop guideline

Add more images to guide

Having a living doc to add municipalities that offer drop-off/(curbside) programs?

Add somewhere:

- Different portal interfaces
- Combining with curbside yard waste
- Processing processes?
 - Windrow
-

How to Use This Guide

This guide is intended for municipal sustainability staff members, public works employees, solid waste coordinators, local government leaders, and/or community partners supporting implementation of compost drop-off programs.

- ***Exploring a compost drop-off program?*** Begin with Chapters 1-3 to understand the benefits, assess community readiness, and build organizational support.

- **Planning a pilot?** Use chapters 4-7 to guide program design, implementation, and operations.
- **Looking for practical tools?** Refer to the templates, checklists, and companion *Communications Package* throughout the planning and implementation process.

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Executive Summary

Food waste is the largest contributor to municipal solid waste sent to landfills at 19% (cite), and 30-40% of the food supply is wasted every year (cite). This represents a critical environmental, economic, and health challenge, as well as an opportunity for municipalities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, divert food waste from landfills, and support local and national sustainability goals. Michigan set a healthy climate goal to reduce food waste by 50% by 2030, in line with national goals, increase recycling by 45% by 2029, and the state of Michigan is transitioning its Materials Management Plans to focus more on composting and circular economy strategies (cite). As municipalities across the state are working to contribute to sustainable solutions, many municipalities are piloting or expanding compost drop-off programs as an accessible first step to diverting food waste.

This guide was developed to support municipalities interested in developing and implementing their own residential compost drop-off pilot programs. While it is based on real-time experience piloting a compost drop-off program in the City of Novi, the recommendations presented in this guide have been intentionally developed to be adapted. This guide incorporates lessons learned from conversations with neighboring municipalities, from ideation to expansion of compost drop-off programs, as well as best practices identified through research to create a practical, replicable resource for local governments.

Rather than prescribing a one-size-fits-all approach, this guide provides a flexible framework that municipalities can tailor to their own community priorities, available resources, staffing capacity, and local infrastructure. While common themes came up during the research phase for this guide, communities differ in population size, demographics, funding, access to composting processing facilities, and organizational capacity. The long-term success of compost drop-off programs must consider these local conditions.

The guide walks you through each stage of developing a compost drop-off pilot, including:

- Understanding the role of composting and evaluating whether a drop-off program is appropriate for your community.
- Building organizational support and identifying key partners.
- Planning program logistics, site selection, operations, and evaluation.
- Anticipating common implementation challenges and strategies used by other municipalities to address them.
- Applying lessons learned and practical tools to support decision-making and continuous improvement.

By documenting practical experiences, highlighting lessons learned, and providing adaptable planning resources, this guide aims to reduce barriers for municipalities considering compost drop-off programs and support the successful launch and future expansion of food waste diversion efforts across Michigan.

Introduction

Purpose of This Guide

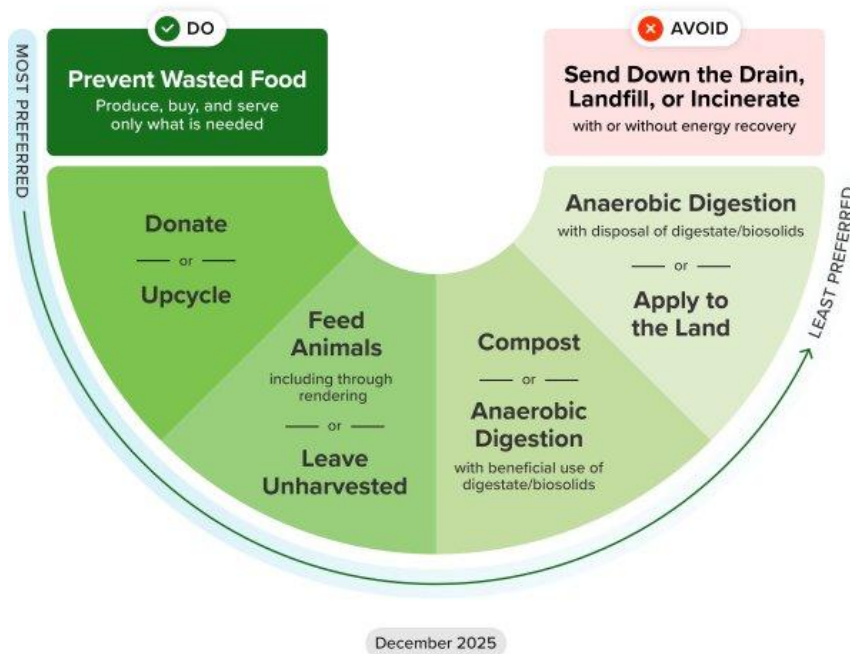
The purpose of this guide is to serve as a starting point for municipalities interested in or in the early stages of developing pilot compost drop-off programs in their communities. It compiles information from federal and state agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), as well as organizations such as ReFED and Make Food Not Waste. Drawing on conversations with municipalities across Michigan, this guide also provides insight into lessons learned, practical tips, and considerations for future program development.

The EPA's Wasted Food Scale shown below outlines a range of strategies for reducing landfilled food waste. The scope of this guide primarily focuses on composting and is intended to support municipalities in planning, launching, and improving compost drop-off programs. Scope



Wasted Food Scale

How to reduce the environmental impacts of wasted food



Food Waste: A National and State Problem

The United States wastes more food than any other country in the world, with nearly 40% of the nation's food supply going uneaten each year (cite). Food waste is the single largest material sent to U.S. landfills, accounting for approximately 22% of landfill waste (cite). In Michigan, food waste similarly makes up about 19% of landfill material (cite). When food waste decomposes in landfills, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas that traps significantly more heat than carbon dioxide and contributes to climate change (cite). An estimated 58% of methane emissions from municipal solid waste landfills come from landfilled food waste (cite). Food waste also represents a substantial loss of resources used to grow, transport, and prepare food, contributing to environmental and economic costs for communities (cite).

Michigan ranks 8th in the nation for landfilled food waste (cite). Since food waste is generated in every community, municipal governments are uniquely positioned to help reduce the amount of food waste sent to landfills by offering accessible and convenient composting opportunities. Compost drop-off programs offer a practical and scalable way to divert food waste from landfills while engaging residents in sustainable waste management practices.

Quick Terminology

Aerobic Digestion (Preferred method for most composting programs):

Decomposition process in which microorganisms break down organic materials **in the presence of oxygen** to produce stable, nutrient-rich compost. This process minimizes odors and methane emissions. Learn more about the process [here](#).

Anaerobic Digestion: Decomposition process in which microorganisms break down organic materials **in the absence of oxygen** to produce biogas (renewable energy).

Backyard Composting: Small-scale composting that residents can do at home to recycle food scraps and yard waste into nutrient-rich compost for personal use. Some materials accepted by compost haulers may not be suitable for backyard composting (e.g. meat, bones, grease). Residents should also follow local municipal ordinances and guidance.

Biodegradable: Products that can break down naturally. Unlike BPI certified compostable materials, which must break down in a specific timeframe (typically under 90 days in commercial facilities), there are no regulations on timeframes for biodegradable materials (cite).

Note: All compostable items are biodegradable, but not all biodegradable items are compostable!

BPI Certified: Products or packaging verified as compostable by the Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI). Look out for this icon:



Composting: A managed, aerobic process where food scraps and other organic materials decompose into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. Read more about the benefits of composting [here](#).

Compost Classification System: A framework that categorizes compost products into four classes based on their level of maturity, stability, and degree of processing. Learn more [here](#).

Contamination (related to composting): When non-accepted materials (e.g. metal, plastic) are discarded in bins meant for accepted materials (e.g. food scraps, BPI certified products). This is a common issue, especially in the initial phases of a compost drop-off program.

Food Loss: Prior to reaching the retail level, food left uneaten as a result of issues in the production, storage, processing, and distribution phases (e.g. crops left unharvested, grain lost to pests, milk that spoils during transit to a store) (cite).

Food Waste: Food fit for human consumption but consciously discarded or uneaten at the retail and consumer levels (cite).

Hauler: Collection services that pick up food waste from drop-off sites. My Green Michigan is a major hauler in Michigan (used by the City of Novi).

Methane: Potent greenhouse gas that is generated when food waste decomposes in landfills.

Processor: Facilities that receive, break down, and turn food waste into finished compost.

STA Certified: Compost products that have been tested and verified through the U.S. Composting Council's Seal of Testing Assurance (STA) Program to meet quality standards. Look out for this icon:



Tipping Fee: Fee that a processor charges a waste hauler to drop off waste materials at their facility.

Wasted Food: Food that was not used for its intended purposes. Differentiated from “food waste” by the EPA. [Learn more here.](#)

Why a Drop-Off Program?

Many municipalities begin with a pilot compost drop-off program because it offers a practical, **low-lift** opportunity to introduce residential food scrap collection to communities. Among the Michigan municipalities engaged in the development of this guide, nearly all began with a pilot residential compost drop-off program and identified curbside collection as a future expansion opportunity. Importantly, municipalities interested in expanding to curbside collection emphasized the value of maintaining drop-off sites even after introducing curbside service. The benefits of maintaining both services include offering residents more options to divert food waste from landfills and reaching residents across a range of household types.

Compared to curbside collection, drop-off programs require lower upfront costs, can be implemented more quickly, and allow municipalities to evaluate resident participation before making larger infrastructure investments. They also provide an **accessible** option for a wide range of households and are designed to be in locations where people already frequent or can access easily, **in an effort to meet people where they are**.

Pilot programs have the capability to capture valuable data on participation rates, collection volumes, contamination, and operational needs. These insights help municipalities refine program design, identify where additional resident education is needed, and improve collection processes before expanding the program. For example, common contaminants like pet waste or plastic bags can provide useful, real-time information around what items residents understand to be accepted or not accepted, while frequently asked questions can inform future outreach campaigns, social media content, and educational materials.

Beyond program operations, pilot data can be used to quantify environmental impacts, including the amount of food waste diverted from landfills and associated greenhouse gas emissions avoided. These metrics help municipalities evaluate pilot success, demonstrate a case for expansion, communicate progress to residents and elected officials, support existing and future funding opportunities, and contribute to local, state, and national waste reduction and healthy climate goals.

Planning Considerations

Launching a successful compost drop-off program typically begins with strong internal support, clear goals and roles, community buy-in, and a realistic understanding of costs and available funding. Before launching a pilot, municipalities should build city council support, identify key partners or champions, assess local policies and resources, and

develop a clear budget and financing plan. It is important to plan as much as possible while also recognizing that you will need to make adjustments as you go.

Gaining Internal Support

A strong foundation of internal support is critical for ensuring that a compost drop-off program has the necessary staff capacity, resources, and long-term commitment to succeed. Municipal leaders should begin by engaging decision-makers, including city councils, managers, and department heads, to demonstrate how composting aligns with existing municipal priorities such as waste reduction, sustainability, climate action, economic development, and community health.

Connecting the program to a municipality's strategic plan or sustainability goals can help frame composting as an extension of existing priorities rather than a standalone initiative. Some examples include:

- This initiative is a critical component of Material Management Plans (MMPs), which will inevitably require Michigan counties to transition towards landfill diversion and other sustainable practices (cite)
- In climate action plans, identifying food waste reduction as a strategy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions because food waste sent to landfills generates methane.
- Council committees (e.g. environmental, sustainability) are looking to implement cost-effective initiatives that fit into broader initiatives of waste reduction.

Identifying internal project champions early can help maintain momentum throughout planning and implementation. When these champions are also prominent or active community members, this can also help to establish trust within communities. A project champion may be an elected official, sustainability coordinator, public works employee, or community leader who can coordinate across departments, communicate program benefits, and help address challenges or concerns. Critical to any success is recognizing the importance of cross-department collaboration, particularly with public works, parks and recreation, sustainability offices, communications teams, and finance departments.

Understanding Municipal Policies and Ordinances

Before beginning to design a compost drop-off program, municipalities should review existing policies, contracts, and ordinances that may affect program operations. This

includes evaluating current solid waste agreements, site-use policies, nuisance ordinances, and any local regulations related to waste management.

Understanding these requirements early can help identify potential barriers or hurdles and how best to design your compost drop-off program.

For example, in Novi: [Ordinance related to visible bins](#); then other common ordinances like [around backyard composting/nuisances](#)

[Grand Rapids](#),

[Who to talk to about process](#)

[Considerations to have; talk to first person and go from there](#)

[E.g. Ferndale → city manager / resident vs staff person](#)

Developing Partnerships

Partnerships can provide technical expertise, operational support, outreach capacity, and community trust. A successful compost program recognizes the collective effort needed to achieve success, which includes collaboration between a range of groups, from municipal departments to regional organizations to businesses to schools and community groups.

Internal Partnerships

- **Sustainability Offices:** Often lead and coordinate program goals, partnerships, grant applications, and evaluation.
- **Sustainability/Environmental Committees:** Elected officials who publicly champion the program.
- **Department of Public Works (DPW):** Supports site preparation, bin management, bin monitoring (mainly for contamination), and coordination with haulers or waste service providers.
- **Parks and Recreation:** Assist with community engagement, can provide access to parks for site locations, [add to](#)

[Grand Rapids, community gardens-](#)

- **Communications Teams:** Are the best people to answer where residents get their news from. Should closely engage with this team to understand community engagement including how residents are receiving the program and what questions they have. They often create, are involved in creating, and give final approval for resident-facing material.
- **Finance Teams:** Assist with budgeting, funding strategies, contracts, grants, and long-term cost planning.

External Partnerships

- **Haulers and Processors:** Provide collection, transportation, and compost processing services. Read more about haulers and processors in the next section.
- **Regional and statewide organizations:** Major groups include Michigan Recycling Coalition, Michigan Organics Council, Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, and Make Food Not Waste. Organizations can provide education, outreach, funding, and technical resources and expertise.
- **State agencies:** EGLE provides guidance, resources, and funding opportunities related to waste reduction, landfill diversion, and organics recycling. [Connect with EGLE food waste specialist generic email address to learn more](#)
- **Community organizations and businesses:** Farmers markets, nonprofits, K-12 schools, universities, and businesses can support outreach, provide sponsorship opportunities, and increase community participation and engagement.
- **Volunteers:** Especially in initial pilot phases and at farmers markets, can assist with monitoring bins for contamination.

Royal Oak, __: Include about some municipalities starting at farmers markets because of the embedded participants/early adopters

Hauling and Compost Processing

Backyard Composting vs. Commercial Composting

Understanding the distinction between backyard composting and commercial composting is important when communicating with residents. Backyard composting is typically designed for single-family households and relies on natural decomposition processes managed by residents. Appropriate materials are generally limited to fruit scraps (fruits and vegetables) and yard waste (e.g. leaves, wood chips). In contrast, commercial compost processors use controlled systems designed to manage larger volumes of organic material and may accept additional materials that are not suitable for backyard composting, such as meat, grease, dairy, and BPI-certified compostable products.

Haulers and Compost Processors

Haulers and compost processors are critical partners in the development of a compost drop-off program. While residents may collect and manage some food scraps through backyard composting, municipal compost drop-off programs often rely on specialized collection and processing systems to manage a broader range of organic materials at a larger scale. Because accepted materials vary by hauler, it is important to check with your chosen hauler to ensure only accepted materials are being collected.

Some municipalities have the infrastructure, equipment, and resources needed to haul and/or process organic materials on their own.

[Detroit and Grand Rapids,](#)

Choosing a Hauler

When choosing a hauler, municipalities should consider available providers based on geographic location, collection capacity, processing partnerships, service model, reporting capabilities, and cost. Because Michigan's composting infrastructure varies by region, communities should identify processors that can reliably accept collected material and provide documentation needed for program evaluation and reporting.

Questions to Ask a Hauler

1. What are my pickup options?
2. What metrics do you capture?
3. How are metrics, including weight of food waste collected, measured?
4. How are metrics communicated to me? Through monthly and annual reports or summaries?

5. To what facilities will our collected food waste go?

My Green Michigan (MGM) is a primary commercial and municipal organic waste hauler across major metro areas in Southern Lower Michigan (cite). In addition to scheduled collection pickup services, MGM provides on-demand sustainability reports that can help municipalities measure program outcomes. Find out more about terms and conditions [here](#) and accepted materials [here](#) (as of the publishing date of this guide).

Reporting capabilities may include:

- Pounds and tons of food waste diverted from landfill
 - Note: MGM currently provides estimates based on bin size/pickup as opposed to the actual weight of each bin
- Estimated greenhouse gas emissions avoided
- Monthly and annual environmental impact summaries
- Collection day service, including:
 - Live driver location tracking on scheduled collection days
 - Confirmation of completed service
- Exportable reports suitable for:
 - City sustainability reporting
 - ESG and climate action initiatives
 - Public communications and internal benchmarking

Compost Processors

Once bins have been collected by haulers, they are taken to composting facilities where organic materials are processed into STA-certified compost and soil blends.

Spurt Industries is a processor servicing Southeast Michigan. They process materials collected in metro Detroit and sell bulk compost and soil blends.

Hammond Farms is another processor servicing Mid-, West- and Southwest Michigan. There are five store locations throughout Greater Lansing, which sell compost and soil.

Funding Sources

Understanding program costs and identifying sustainable funding sources is an important, and often underestimated, step in planning a compost drop-off program.

Costs will vary depending on program size, collection model, number of sites, types and number of bins, hauler, and staffing needs. Funding sources may include:

Municipal Funding

- Solid waste fees: flat fee per household for trash collection and disposal
- Millages: property tax based on home's assessed value

Grant Funding

- Grant funding can help municipalities launch pilot programs by covering initial costs, such as equipment, outreach materials, and staffing. Note that most grants will not cover fees such as hauling fees.
- See the Funding Opportunities Table (Appendix C) for a list of potential grants and financing resources.

External Funding / Partnerships

- Businesses
- Nonprofits

Southfield: MFNW & Biobag

Budget and Cost Considerations

- **Collection Equipment**
 - Collection Bins
 - Plastic bin (provided by MGM?)
 - 32-gallon:
 - 64-gallon: Monthly service fee



- Enclosed bin
 - Bigbelly
 - 47-gallon:
 - 150-gallon:
 - Custom graphic wraps:
 - Smart Compost App:
 - metroSTOR
 - 95-gallon: \$2,425-\$4,000 per bin
 - 12 month subscription to metroKEY app: \$320 per bin
 - Delivery fee: ~2,500

Why you'd choose one bin over another or benefits to each bin type: primary enclosed for contamination

- Southfield: can't see what someone before you put, advantage so not repeating same error

include estimated costs, ex. From Kent County about metroSTOR bins and how there's different design options like steel handle, etc. / talk about different costs of bins if doing a plastic bin (32 vs 64) or enclosed bin like Ann Arbor, Kent County, Southfield



- Signage
- Liners
 - For large bin - additional costs from MGM (included in bin section),
 - For countertop bins - **make sure they are BPI certified! Not all biodegradable bags are compostable. And if not compostable, can also leave behind microplastics.**
 - Recommended brands with BPI Certified bags to collect food scraps:
 - Biobag
 - EcoSafe
 - UNNI
 - Can check other bags at: <https://bpiworld.org/find-certified-products>
 - Not BPI Certified
 - Plastic produce bags at grocery stores
 - Other plastic bags
- Starter Kits
 - Countertop compost bins (different sizes, features) - link to some examples, include photos of different municipalities' bins?, Home Depot sealable bin



Source: Make Food Detroit

- **Hauling and Processing**

- Transportation costs, contamination fees, tipping fees
 - Determining pickup frequency

What to consider (e.g. Kent County picks up at same time each pickup day regardless of how much waste collected so lower lift on municipal staff and cleanliness of bins / considering tradeoffs and how expenses can balance out, where to take from)

- **Staffing and Labor**

- Staff time for program coordination, site maintenance, contamination monitoring, customer service, reporting and evaluation, grantwriting, communications/education materials
- [Tip: Overestimate costs to account for inflation](#)

Engaging Your Community

Achieving food security is not just an issue of access, but also of utilization. For example, if you give someone a banana and they don't know how to peel it, the banana will go uneaten. Similarly, even the most thoughtfully designed compost drop-off

program will fall short if its residents do not understand why it matters, how it works, or how to participate. Clear, concise communication is essential to the success of a residential compost drop-off program.

Include about how to directly engage community members and build them into the program planning

Differences in communities, familiar and interest in composting, etc

- Residents receiving programs differently
 - Southfield: idea of this is completely new
 - Canton: already had council support, etc.

In Grand Rapids, community engagement framework, Southfield focus groups, etc.

Building Your Communications Strategy

Define Your Objectives

An effective communications strategy begins with clearly defining what the program aims to achieve. While increasing awareness of a new compost drop-off program is often the most outright objective, municipalities should consider both short-term goals, such as X number of participants in the program, and long-term goals, such as seeing a behavioral shift among residents to waste less food in the first place.

Food waste is also a broad issue that can be addressed in many different ways, as illustrated by the EPA's Wasted Food Scale. It can be easy for communications to become unfocused or pull residents in too many directions, leaving them overwhelmed, confused, or unengaged. Especially during the pilot, establishing a clear communications strategy and consistent messaging helps keep outreach centered on the goals of each municipalities' compost drop-off programs.

Understand Your Audience

Residents will engage with a compost drop-off program from different perspectives, bringing varying levels of knowledge, experience, and motivation. Early participants are often residents who already compost, are interested in sustainability, or have previously expressed interest in a composting program. Municipalities can intentionally reach these early adopters through targeted outreach at locations and events where they are

already engaged, such as farmers markets, environmental events, community gardens, or sustainability-focused organizations. Building participation among these groups can help establish early momentum and create community ambassadors for the program.

As outreach expands to the broader community, communications should not assume prior knowledge of composting. Instead, messaging should begin with basic information about why the program exists, how it works, what materials are accepted and not accepted, and how residents can participate. Municipalities should also monitor resident feedback and conversations as much as possible on commonly used communication channels, such as Facebook and Nextdoor, to identify recurring questions, misconceptions, and areas where additional education is needed. These insights can inform future communications while providing real-time feedback on how residents are responding to existing messaging, allowing municipalities to refine their approach and adapt their communications strategy over time.

Throughout the process, municipalities should consider their community's demographics, interests, values, and communication habits when tailoring messages and determining best communication channels.

Develop Effective Messaging

Effective messaging should address the following:

1. Who is your audience?
2. Why are you communicating to your audience?
3. How does your audience best receive information?
4. What does your audience value? What resonates with them?
5. What is the takeaway message?
6. What do you want your audience to do?

Identify Communication Goal

Program Awareness:

- Engage residents who are likely to be active participants
- Engage residents who are not likely to be active participants

Education:

- Reduce contamination
- Divert waste from landfills
- Build long-term behavior/habit changes

Reminder:

Impact:

- Emphasize collective effort and celebrate community impact

Keeping each communication focused on one objective makes it easier for residents to understand and remember the message (cite).

Find what resonates with your community

While some communities may respond to messages about climate action and greenhouse gas reduction, others may be more motivated by composting, landfill diversion, reducing costs, or food waste prevention. Tailoring messaging to local priorities makes the program more relevant and engaging for communities, increasing the chances of getting someone's attention.

Make one clear ask or call to action

1. Check out the program website
2. Sign up to participate in the program
3. Follow on social media
4. Identify a drop-off site near you

Communication Best Practices

- Use clear, plain language
- Focus on one clear message or call to action
- Use humor when appropriate
- Lead with visuals
- Prioritize short-form videos and reels over static graphics when possible
- Repeat key messages often
- Direct residents back to the program website
- Include an email or phone number on communications materials
- Have a living document with resident FAQs (from calls, emails, social media, etc) and use to develop content
 - FAQ examples:
 - Where do I get a food scraps container?
 - Can I still participate if I use my own food scraps container?
 - What are your operating hours?

- Is this program available year-round or seasonally?
- Be mindful of ADA accessibility, including adding descriptive captions to images and additional cues to yes/no signage that uses red and green colors
 - [Go into more detail about this](#)

Educational Materials

Because this is a new program and residents will have varying familiarity with composting, it is important to anticipate and do your best to minimize barriers (perceived or otherwise) **for** participation. Effective education materials are critical to residents' feelings of self-efficacy, or ability to participate, and ineffective education materials can have the opposite effect, deterring participation.

Common Concerns

Most common concern **from residents** will likely be around odor and pests/rodents.

Most common challenges **for municipalities** will likely be around contamination.

Concern	Considerations/Responses	What You Can Say
Smell/odor	Proper material management, collection/pick-up frequency, container design	"By keeping the areas around bins clean, you can help to minimize odors." "Our bins are picked up [weekly/biweekly] to keep our drop-off sites clean and well maintained."
Pests/rats/vermin	Secure containers, acceptable materials, maintenance, collective participation to keep collection areas clean, the alternative being food scraps in landfill bin	"Food waste is just being sorted into a different bin. If there isn't an issue with pests/vermin going into your trash bins, then there shouldn't be an issue with them going into your

		compost bin.” “Bins raised from ground
Contamination	Resident education, clear signage, periodic monitoring	
Illegal dumping	Site selection, signage, monitoring	
Staff capacity	Start small, collaborate across departments, partner with volunteers or organizations where appropriate	
Cost	Grants, phased implementation, pilot approach to evaluate costs	
Resident participation	Outreach before/during launch, pre- and post-surveys, ongoing evaluation	

Accepted vs. Non-Accepted Materials

- Common contaminants
 - Pet waste
 - Plastic bags
 - Non-BPI certified products
 - Recyclable materials (e.g. beer cans)
- Bleached vs unbleached
- BPI vs not BPI
 - Real examples of looking for the BPI logo and finding biodegradable or other things, like at the grocery store

Wishcycling

[Link terms to terminology page?](#)

Effective Examples

- Infographics, etc - include a few and link to more existing examples, explain why they're effective
- Mascot like [Ann Arbor recycling raccoon](#)

Phase 1. Preparing to Launch Your Pilot

The pilot phase provides municipalities with an opportunity to test program design, understand resident participation, identify operational challenges, and collect data needed to determine whether the program should be expanded or modified.

Municipalities should approach pilots as learning opportunities rather than final program models. Early decisions, including site selection, registration approach, outreach strategies, and collection logistics, can be adjusted based on resident feedback and operational data.

Define your Pilot

Before launching a compost drop-off pilot, municipalities should clearly define the purpose, scope, and intended outcomes of the pilot. Establishing clear goals helps guide decision-making, communicate **expectations** to residents and **stakeholders**, and evaluate whether the pilot achieves its intended outcomes.

Key questions to consider include:

- What problem is the pilot intended to address or solve?
- Who is the target audience?
- How many residents or households does the pilot aim to reach?
- How long will the pilot operate?
- What outcomes will determine whether the program should continue or expand?
- How much funding is required to operate the pilot?

Common pilot goals may include:

- Increasing community access to composting services
- Diverting food waste from landfills
- Offering a service in demand by residents
- Testing collection locations and operational needs
- Building community awareness around food waste prevention and composting
- Contributing to local and statewide sustainability and climate action goals

Grand Rapids started with city staff who were champions/early adopters, focus on circular economy and equity

Developing Program Goals, Objectives, and Evaluation Plans

The duration of pilot programs is up to the municipality, but the most common deciding factor has been funding. Michigan pilot programs have ranged from 3 months to one year.

Examples: Detroit, Southfield, etc. on timing of their pilots

An evaluation plan should be developed prior to launching the pilot to identify what information should be collected, how success will be measured, and how findings will inform future decisions, including making the case for expansion.

Potential evaluation metrics include:

- Number of registered participants (via sign-up form)
- Pounds/tonnage of food waste collected and diverted from landfill
- Resident satisfaction and feedback (via pre- and post- surveys)
- Resident behavior change (via pre- and post- surveys)
- Site usage patterns

Using Surveys to Understand Resident Behavior

Pre- and post- pilot surveys can help municipalities understand changes in resident knowledge, attitude, and behaviors related to composting. While participation numbers give a general sense of whether residents are using the program, surveys can provide insight into why residents participate, barriers they experience to participate, familiarity with composting, and what improvement may increase engagement.

For example - Kent County, Detroit,

By establishing clear goals, municipalities can tailor pre- and post- survey questions to address specific community needs. Surveys can help answer questions such as:

- Are residents already interested in composting?
- Did residents understand what materials were accepted?

- Are there clear preferences in drop-off sites and utilization?
- What motivated residents to participate?
- What prevented some residents from participating?
- Did participation influence residents' broader food waste behaviors?
- What can be done to improve the program?

Food waste in itself is especially difficult to measure (cite), so by including surveys from the beginning, municipalities can establish compelling baseline knowledge and compare changes over time.

Tip: Pre-survey questions can also be embedded into sign-up forms.

Choosing a Program Name

The language used to describe a compost drop-off program can influence resident understanding and participation. Municipalities should consider whether terms such as *compost* or *food scraps* best communicate the purpose of the program to their communities.

For many of the municipalities consulted, **Compost Drop-Off Program** or **Food Scraps Drop-Off Program** were common names used. [Also organics recycling, etc.](#)

For some residents, it may be easier to understand the program as a compost drop-off program since that is the end product and a primary reason for diverting food waste from landfills. However, it has the potential to confuse people since they are not seeing compost produced during this program and may not connect the food scraps as easily to compost. On the other hand, a food scraps drop-off program may be easier to understand since that is what participants bring to the drop-off sites. However, it may limit residents to only bring fruit and vegetable scraps when other materials are accepted.

No matter what term municipalities choose to use for their programs, they should remain clear and consistent across communications to strengthen community awareness and understanding of the program.

Pilot Management Considerations

Determining Participation Requirements

Municipalities should determine whether residents need to register to participate. Different approaches offer different benefits and challenges.

Registration	Benefits	Challenges
Required <i>*Typical if using metroSTOR or Bigbelly bins with app/keypad access</i>	Can count participants, communicate program updates directly with participants, collect baseline data, distribute surveys	May create barriers, email list has to be maintained
Optional (Communicated as Required)	Similar to Required	Likely will not be capturing all participants, email list has to be maintained
Optional (Communicated as Optional)	Will likely engage active participants	Likely will capture fewer participants, email list has to be maintained
N/A (Open Participation)	Reduces barriers to participate, no additional staff time needed to maintain email list	More difficult to track users and collect demographic or behavioral information, cannot establish baseline data, cannot provide program updates to participants

Municipalities should consider their evaluation goals, staffing capacity, and desired level of community engagement when selecting an approach.

Seasonal Considerations

Municipalities should determine whether pilots will operate seasonally or year-round.

Seasonal pilots may be useful for communities that want to test demand before investing in year-round operations.

Year-round pilots provide more consistent access and allow municipalities to evaluate participation across seasons but may require additional planning. Considerations include: snow and ice management around collection sites, reduced participation during colder months, bin accessibility after snow events or near construction, and adjusted collection schedules.

Canton and ___ also noted that bees were an issue in the fall, so they had to get a beekeeper/bee services to remedy the situation.

Site Planning and Infrastructure

Choosing Drop-Off Locations: Site selection is a critical component to the success of a program. If locations are not in convenient, highly accessible locations for residents, it can deter or limit residents from participating. Most existing programs identified city-owned properties as ideal locations for drop-off sites **since they require less buy-in**. Other locations include community centers, parks and recreation facilities, farmers markets, libraries, fire stations, and highly trafficked community locations.

When choosing sites, municipalities should consider:

- Proximity to residents
- Parking availability
- ADA accessibility
- Safety and lighting
- Hours of operation
- Ease of servicing by haulers
- Visibility and public awareness

Sites should be located in areas that are convenient for residents while also allowing easy and efficient collection by haulers.

Site Layout and Accessibility

The physical layout of a drop-off site affects both participation and likelihood of contamination. Municipalities should consider:

- Placement of compost bins away from other landfill waste and recycling bins -

add more to this (with advice from Royal Oak and Kent County).

- Clear pathways for residents
- Space for vehicles to easily drop-off

- Visibility of signage from entrance to drop-off site to bins and instructions on how to use the bins

For example,

Equipment and Site Design

Equipment needs will vary based on population and program size, anticipated participation, and collection frequency. Site design should consider accessibility for haulers and residents, eye-level signage, and using available space in the clearest ways possible.

Using the below Bigbelly bins as examples (Note: recycling and landfill only, but design principles can be applied to compost bins):

Design 1:



Design 2:



Design 1 does not clearly identify what materials can go into each bin. Without looking directly at the bins and below eye-level, there isn't any information to differentiate between the two bins.

Design 2 uses a wrap design (an extra cost that will likely pay off in the long run), which describes what should be dropped in the recycling bin. However, with the available space on the landfill bin, they could have identified the right bin as a landfill bin. Additionally, the white text is below eye-level and can be difficult to read against the background image.

How both designs could be improved -

Without easy, clear, and concise signage, residents will be less likely to participate or more likely to contaminate bins. Signs should include:

- Information available at different angles (including sides of bins), so people have a chance to process information before reaching the bins to dispose of materials
- What materials are accepted
- What materials are not accepted
- Instructions for emptying food scraps
- Contact information for questions
- (Optional) QR code to feedback form or check-in

Common site components include:

- Collection bins
- Signage explaining accepted and prohibited materials
- Site identification information
- Clear signage

Municipalities should determine:

- Whether starter kits/countertop containers will be offered to residents
- Number and size of bins needed per site
- How often bins will be emptied
- Whether bins should be locked and require app/keypad accessibility

[Example municipalities and the companies → metroSTOR](#)

Collection Logistics

Municipalities should establish collection procedures before launch, including:

- Pickup frequency
- Who is responsible for monitoring sites

- Routine monitoring helps municipalities ensure that drop-off sites remain clean, accessible, and operations while minimizing contamination and service disruptions.
- How overflow will be addressed
- How contamination issues will be addressed and/or communicated

Collection schedules may need to be adjusted depending on participation and scale throughout the pilot period.

Staffing and Operations

While staff are likely to wear many hats, having clearly defined roles whenever possible can help ensure smooth operations. Municipalities should identify responsibilities for:

- Program coordination
- Resident communication
- Site monitoring
- Data collection
- Vendor coordination
- Issue resolution

Staff capacity needs may change throughout the pilot.

Municipalities shared that more staff time was needed at the beginning of pilots but leveled off/became self-sustaining between a few months to a year after launching a pilot.

Phase 2. Launching Your Pilot

A strong launch helps build awareness and encourage participation. Municipalities should consider:

- Selecting a launch date that aligns with community events or sustainability campaigns (e.g. Earth Day)
- Hosting kickoff events
- Partnering with local organizations

Outreach and Education

Resident education should continue throughout the pilot and be integrated in other community programming. Outreach may vary depending on community values and interests. For example, some communities may respond well to outreach explaining why food waste reduction matters while others may respond to how landfill diversion has economic benefits.

Daily Operations

Once the program launches, municipalities should monitor performance and make adjustments as needed. Key operational activities include:

- Monitoring collection sites
- Maintaining equipment and signage
- Addressing contamination
- Managing overflow bins
- Adjusting collection frequency
- Responding to resident questions
- Reviewing participation and evaluation data

Regular evaluation allows municipalities to identify what is working, address challenges quickly, and determine whether the program is ready for expansion.

Case Study: City of Novi's Pilot Program

Novi is a mid-sized suburban community of approximately 68,000 residents in predominantly single-family housing and a generally car-dependent transportation system. Most residents drive to work, making conveniently located drop-off sites with available parking an important consideration for program accessibility.

Given the size of the city, we determined that starting off with two bins at two drop-off sites (Novi Civic Center and MSU Tollgate Farm and Education Center) would offer residents centrally located and convenient access points to drop off their scraps. Once we are able to evaluate bin utilization, we can determine if more bins should be added.

☒ **Internal Support**

- Our Environmental Sustainability Committee appealed to the City Council and received funding (not to exceed \$10,000) to implement the pilot program.

☒ **Ordinances and Policies**

- We reviewed ordinances and policies and determined that while bins could be in visible sites, the bins themselves cannot be easily visible___. Also about backyard composting.

☒ **Partnerships**

- Communicated with internal teams
- Received external funding and operational support from University of Michigan Graham Sustainability Institute (Catalyst Leadership Circle Fellow and Technical Advisor) and EGLE

☒ **Hauler**

- Chose My Green Michigan as hauler
- Food waste collected and processed at Spurt Wixom facility, which is close to Novi (reducing carbon footprint)

☒ **Funding**

- City Council
- EGLE (CLC Fellowship)
- Budget helped to determine pilot scale including number of bins (2 at each site, 4 total to start), curbside plastic bins (more cost-efficient and easier to rollout)

☒ **Engaging Community (pre-launch)**

- Tabled at Arbor Day and Community Fest, engaged with residents ranging from ~18-60 years old, including couples (older and younger), families, and high school students
- Collaborated with Communications Team to identify age groups reached via different outreach channels (skews older via Facebook, younger via Instagram, homeowners via Nextdoor, general public via newsletters)

☒ **Goals**

- Initiative for Environmental Sustainability Committee
- Raise awareness about food waste and contribute to state healthy climate goals
- Divert food waste from landfills

☒ **Logistics**

- Name: Compost Drop-Off Program
- Initially chose to have open participation but in first few weeks decided to have a registration form (optional but communicated as required)
- Year-round program
- Site locations: Civic Center and MSU Tollgate Farm and Education Center
- Equipment (2 64-gallon bins at each location, signs that designate compost sites, signs with information from My Green Michigan on what material are and are not accepted)

- Site Design: Bins located away from landfill and recycling receptacles
- Staffing: Environmental Sustainability Committee, municipal employee, fellow for initial program phase
- ☑ **Program launch, outreach and operations, and daily operations**
 - Strategy: Launch during __
 - Monitored by city staff and MSU Tollgate employees

Phase 3. Evaluating and Expanding Your Program

Evaluation is an ongoing process that should begin before a pilot launches and continue throughout implementation, not only at the end of the pilot. Regularly reviewing participation, operations, and resident feedback during the pilot period helps municipalities identify challenges early, make informed adjustments, and build a strong case for continued investment or program expansion.

By documenting successes, challenges, and opportunities for improvement throughout the pilot, municipalities can determine whether the program is meeting its objectives and identify strategies for long-term sustainability and growth.

Evaluation and Expansion

Pilot data can help demonstrate the value of compost drop-off programs to city councils, elected officials, residents, and potential funders. Information that may strengthen the case for expansion includes:

- High resident participation or continued growth
- Low contamination rates
- Positive resident feedback
- Measured landfill diversion
- Environmental benefits, such as greenhouse gas emissions avoided
- Alignment with municipal sustainability or climate goals
- Evidence of community demand for continued services

Scaling the Program

Once a pilot demonstrates success, municipalities may consider expanding services based on participation patterns and operational capacity. Expansion should be informed by data and responsive to community needs.

Potential expansion strategies include:

- Adding additional drop-off sites in underserved or high-demand areas
- Increasing the number of bins at existing locations

- Being careful not to turn sites into waste transfer sites like what Royal Oak or Southfield talked about
- This can also be done during the pilot if funding allows

- Offering finished compost to residents

- Some municipalities do this/have done from pilot phase, compost pick-up day for residents

- Integrating program with other sustainability initiatives/programming
- Adding curbside collection services

Secondary

- Schools
 - Engagement through children's programming
- Restaurants
- Farmers Markets
 - Can include about municipalities that started with farmers markets like Royal Oak
- Fire Stations
 - Madison Heights

Continuous Improvement

Even after a program expands, municipalities should continue evaluating performance and identifying opportunities for improvement. Examples of what this may look like include:

- Updating education materials
- Improving signage
- Introducing new outreach campaigns to reach untapped or underrepresented residents

- Integrating or adding more education on food waste prevention

Appendices

Appendix A: Sign-Up Form and Surveys

Appendix B: Content Library

Each example should follow the strategy → communication objective, primary audience, message strategy, call to action

Example

Communication Objective	Primary Audience	Message Strategy	Call to Action
Education	New participants	Composting	Scan QR code



[Series](#) - have to update QR code and logo placeholder

Wanting to provide materials in areas where residents already receive communications - advice from a few municipalities. On all materials, include and be cohesive with municipality branding (logo, colors, fonts) and directing people to municipal websites. For one campaign, be consistent across channels, so it's immediately clear that it's all connected.

Some materials to consider:

Bookmarks: Where do residents frequent, program reminder repetition

- Fun, humor

Brochures: People get a lot of brochures, so something engaging; not too text-heavy, direct to website

Countertop compost caddy decal: If providing starter kits or countertop bins to residents, include signage indicating what materials are and are not accepted. When you have space, use it strategically.

Flyers: Can include in welcome packets

Fridge Magnets: Include why - subconsciously will glance at it, etc.

- Using graphics vs real images
- Text vs. images vs text & images
- Anticipate what types of waste residents may have and use those images on materials

Example of this:



Grand Rapids staff pilot- included images of what lunch might look like to staff



THROW ME AWAY



when in doubt, throw it out!

Signage: In addition to signage from hauler, have municipal branded signage at drop-off sites.

Appendix C: Funding Opportunities

Funder	Grant Name	Amount	Deadline	Grant Period	RFP
EGLE	Organics Infrastructure Grant	\$5k-\$250k	8/14/2026	9/30/26-9/30/28	Link
NextCycle	Seed Award Program	\$8k-10k	6/30/2026		Link

NextCycle	Circular Economy Grant	\$50k-\$250k	3/13/2026		Link

Appendix D: Additional Resources

Topic	Resources
Composting - What it is - Benefits	EPA Composting: https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/composting#benefits NRDC Composting 101: https://www.nrdc.org/stories/composting-101
Backyard Composting	EGLE (video): https://www.michigan.gov/egle/about/organization/materials-management/composting/food-waste EGLE Home Composting: https://www.michigan.gov/egle/-/media/Project/Websites/egle/Documents/Programs/MMD/Compost/Home-Guide.pdf
Food Waste	ReFED Progress on the Plate: 2026 U.S. Food Waste Report: https://refed.org/food-waste/refed-us-food-waste-report-2026/ RTS Food Waste in America in 2026: https://www.rts.com/resources/guides/food-waste-america/

	USDA Food Waste FAQs: https://www.usda.gov/about-food/food-safety/food-loss-and-waste/food-waste-faqs EPA United States 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal: https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/united-states-2030-food-loss-and-waste-reduction-goal
Reports/Guides/Roadmaps	Michigan Sustainable Business Forum/Make Food Not Waste/EGLE, MI Food Waste Roadmap: https://misbf.org/michigan-food-waste-policy-roadmap/ EGLE Food Waste and Recovery: https://www.michigan.gov/egle/about/organization/materials-management/composting/food-waste Michigan Sustainable Business Forum 2024 Economic Impact Report: https://misbf.org/msw/
Social Marketing/Media and Communications	EPA Social Marketing Toolkit: https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2023-04/EPA_Wasted_Food_Social_Marketing_Toolkit.pdf
Broader Food System	ReFED Building a Food System That Works for Everyone: https://refed.org/uploads/buildinga-foodsystem-jedi-assessment.pdf

Other communications materials

- Make Food Not Waste
- RRRASOC
- ReFED