



Feasibility Study for Organic Waste Collection and Disposal in Watonwan County

**A project of Climate Smart St. James in collaboration
with UMN Southwest Regional Sustainability Development Partnership (RSDP)**

Motivation

A number of factors informed the decision by Climate Smart St. James to make this proposal to the UMN Southwest RSDP:

- Reducing waste has been a priority for Climate Smart St. James since issues related to the topic were identified by residents at our first “Community Conversations” event two years ago.
- There has been a positive response in the educational awareness programs about do’s and don’ts of recycling, the dangers of microplastics in our lives, products that offer an alternative to single use plastic, and backyard composting, as well as specific initiatives to reduce waste in general – encouraging use of reusable shopping bags and the NexTrex plastic recycling program.
- 20 - 30% of residential curbside garbage consists of food scraps and is currently hauled to regional landfills where its decomposition results in methane gas being released into the atmosphere. Residents have expressed strong interest in having an option for organic waste collection in our community - to keep our food scraps out of landfills.
- Residents also express a growing interest in purchasing compostable products as alternatives to throw away plastic. Without an organic waste collection that delivers this material to a commercial composting facility, these items too end up in a landfill where they do not have the necessary conditions to break down.
- There are various models for organic waste collection in our region from whose experience we can learn. We have contacts through a variety of networks including the Climate Smart Municipalities statewide coalition facilitated by the Institute on the Environment at UMN, the AMC (Association of Minnesota Counties) Solid Waste Work Group, Region Nine Development Commission, and the Southwest Regional Sustainability Development Partnership. Additionally, in an informal conversation with West Central Sanitation, our contracted garbage service, the provider indicated being open to discussions about delivering organic waste to a composting facility.

Community Partners

The proposal was submitted to RSDP after reaching out to community stakeholders who were identified as having a potential interest in the project and who would have a relevant perspective that would be beneficial to discussions of the project. The following expressed interest in and support of the proposed feasibility study:

- Kyla Schlomann - Organic Waste Coordinator, Watonwan County
- Jim Branstad - Watonwan County Board of Directors, member of Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) Solid Waste Work Group, Region Nine Development Commission
- Baily Hanson - Food Services Director, St. James Public Schools
- Sue Harris - Community Education Director, St. James Public Schools, Rotary member
- George Koenig - Facilities Director, Mayo Clinic Health System
- Luisa Trapero - Convivencia Hispana, Region Nine Development Commission
- Paul Harris - Region Nine Development Commission, Sertoma member
- Nonnie Hanson – community member
- Jane Oldenburg – community member

Purpose

We hope to reduce the amount of organic waste (particularly food scraps and other compostable material) that is currently going into garbage collection and ending up in landfills. In addition to offering information and encouragement for available programs for residents to utilize on a household level, we hope to develop a comprehensive feasibility study, including cost analysis, of options for establishing a program providing the service of organic waste collection and disposal for residents, businesses and institutions in Watonwan County.

Potential impact on the environmental, social and economic sustainability of the region

The feasibility study will provide the necessary data and research needed to inform future decision making concerning the development of a program to provide the service of organic waste collection and disposal to residents of the county.

Although the actual development of a specific program goes beyond the scope of our current proposal, such a service has the future potential to significantly reduce the amount of organic waste (particularly food scraps and other biodegradable/compostable materials and products) currently being unloaded at regional landfills. The negative environmental impact of the methane gas produced by decomposing food scraps has been well documented and could be mitigated by providing an alternative option for disposal.

Providing additional opportunities for composting beyond yard waste that goes to the city's composting site and what individuals are currently able to do with backyard composting systems makes it easier for residents to reduce the amount of organic waste that they put into their garbage collection.

We hope that both the feasibility study and the accompanying local educational initiatives will encourage and empower residents, businesses and institutions to play an even more active role in practices that will strengthen the sustainability of our rural area.

Project activities and goals

Goal 1: To conduct a feasibility study on options to establish an organic waste collection and disposal program in Watonwan County, including cost analysis.

Local project team members will:

- Identify contracts for garbage and recycling services in the county, as well as the timeline and process for renewal (Summer 25)
- Identify local, county and regional stakeholders, including, but not limited to city and county government, the schools, health system (clinics and hospitals), food packaging and processing plants, business community, service groups, and private individuals (Summer and Fall 25)

RSDP full team/ will hire a graduate student (Spring 26) to do the following:

- Research currently operating programs in Watonwan County to become familiar with the local communities.
- Research established organic waste collection and disposal programs for communities and/or counties of similar size with the help of graduate student and Syd Bauer in Stevens County (Spring 26)
- Together with the local project team, leverage connections with the AMC (Association of Minnesota Counties) Solid Waste Work Group, representatives of the MPCA (Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) and delegates of the MPCA trip to Germany focusing on organic waste (including representatives from Dem-Con Companies, Ramsey/Washington Recycling and Energy Center, Republic Services, MPCA, etc.) (Fall and Winter 2025/26)
- Identify feasible options for an organic waste collection and disposal program/service for residents, businesses and institutions in Watonwan County, including cost analysis, benefits to the county residents, businesses and institutions, along with available and/or potentially available funding sources (Spring 26)
- Prepare a report outlining the feasibility study (by June 2026)

Goal 2: To engage and motivate the community to reduce organic waste in current garbage services.

Local Team organizes and offers programs on currently available options for reducing organic waste in garbage collection (Summer and Fall 2025)

- Yard Waste disposal at city composting site
- Backyard composting
- Biodegradable/compostable product availability for local customers
- Establish program for TREX plastic film and other product collection/recycling.

Local team organizes field trips to sites/communities/counties with organic waste collection/ disposal programs (Summer and Fall 2025)

- Lake Crystal and Mankato: Organics Collection and Recycling program
- Shakopee: Dem-Con (current site for local recycling, building an anaerobic digester), Dakota Prairie Composting (SMSC – Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community); and Newport: Ramsey and Washington Recycling and Energy Center
- Morris: residential and business, Stevens County Organics Collection and Recycling Program
- Rochester: Olmsted Waste to Energy Facility

Local team conducts stakeholder meetings.

- General information/awareness/education, updates and discussion (Summer and Fall 2025, Winter 2026)
- Presentation of feasibility study (June 2026)

UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES:

Climate Smart St. James meeting: presentation on local composting options
Monday, August 25, 6:30 – 8:00 p.m. , Watonwan County Human Services Center

Community Partner luncheon meeting: RSDP Feasibility Study Project
Wednesday, September 3, noon – 1:00 p.m., Watonwan County Library, St. James Meeting Room



Community Energy Ambassadors Cohort Training

Monday, September 22 and 29; 5:30 – 7:30 p.m., Watonwan County Human Services Center

<https://tinyurl.com/CERTscohort>

Moving Forward: Climate Smart Conversations and Celebration; Climate Smart St. James Annual Update and Awards Dinner and Program
Monday, October 6, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m., First Presbyterian Church



Field Trips to Sites with Organic Waste Collection Programs

Please consider joining us to visit any of these sites (Note: some dates are still TBD)

<https://tinyurl.com/ClimateSmartFieldTrips>



Climate Smart St. James

Website: <https://www.climatesmartstj.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/climatesmartstjames/>

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