



Getting to Zero Waste Together: White Paper

By Josh Blaine

Business Development, in.gredients

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The mission of the Office of Sustainability is to provide leadership, influence positive action through engagement, and create measurable benefits for Austin related to climate, food, resource efficiency, and resiliency.



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Austin's Zero Waste Master Plan calls for at least 90% diversion from our landfills by 2040. Our current diversion rate is approximately 43%, which means we're likely going to need these next two decades to fully transform this City's relationship to landfills and waste. But the Master Plan also calls for hitting certain benchmarks along the way, including a 2020 goal of 75% diversion. Suddenly we're looking at a much more rapid increase in our City-wide diversion in order to stay on track. As daunting as this goal seems, there is reason to think that it is achievable.

Consider the recent waste diversion studies conducted by Austin Resource Recovery and third-party engineering firm, CB&I. The results of these studies, which examined in great detail the contents of both our commercial and residential waste streams, show a clear path forward. In the residential composition study conducted in 2014 for example, 46% of our trash was compostable material and 44% was recyclable. That means 90% of trash in residential carts can already be diverted from our landfills if we had the right tools and education.

Currently, only 14,000 select households have the opportunity to divert food scraps, soiled paper and other organic materials via a third green cart. These households have been participating in the City's pilot program for the last few years, helping Austin Resource Recovery learn some valuable best practices for a full city-wide rollout. Add the committed backyard composter and early adopting Compost Pedallers customers and you've still got only a small fraction of residential waste producers even capable of diverting that 46% organics from the landfill. With funds approved in the City Budget, that begins to change in 2017 with the phased city-wide rollout of curbside compost collection. By 2020 all 200,000 Austin Resource Recovery customers will have a third green cart for organics collection.

Though organics collection is necessary for reaching our zero waste goals, it's not a silver bullet. The organics pilot showed mixed results, proving that a robust community outreach and education program must go hand and hand with the service. Thankfully, Austin Resource Recovery recently hired a Community Outreach Coordinator with a good track record, who is already taking promising steps towards reaching more people in a

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more effective way. Grassroots and collaborative outreach will go a long way in bridging the gap of knowledge and experience that the pilot revealed.

Going beyond Town Hall meetings, fliers, door-to-door conversations and phone calls will be important, too. For a rapid and comprehensive transformation of our waste behaviors, we need a full-blown cultural shift. That means Austinites need to see diversion happening in public parks, City buildings, and private businesses. The Universal Recycling Ordinance has been implementing these policies for a few years, introducing larger swaths of our public and private institutions with each passing year. Keeping on track and holding all stakeholders accountable to these policies will be important as we move forward. If residents don't see recycling and composting outside of the home, proper and consistent diversion in the home is likely to suffer.

Austin Resource Recovery's "city-wide" compost collection comprises roughly 200,000 waste collection services customers, which is less than 15% of the City's entire waste stream. That means the lion's share of our diversion needs to come from the far more heterogeneous world of private haulers. These private companies service our large apartment complexes, office buildings, food businesses, schools, etc. The diversion studies from these haulers showed somewhat similar results to the household diversion study conducted a year earlier: 37% of landfill waste was compostable and 44% reusable or recyclable. The Universal Recycling Ordinance has already begun requiring food permitted businesses to practice diversion, which will certainly help shift these numbers closer to our target of 75% by 2020. However, there are still some gaps in policy that need to be addressed by the Zero Waste Advisory Commission and City Council.

The Universal Recycling Ordinance organics diversion requirement for food-permitted businesses, for example, could be strengthened. As the ordinance stands, restaurants, grocery stores and food trucks are only required to divert their "back of house" organics. While this is an important step, it leaves a lot on the table and does little to increase public awareness of the cultural shift (imagine patrons continuing to toss their uneaten tacos in trash bins at a food trailer park). A more comprehensive ordinance will help instill a sense of solidarity among businesses and residents.

Last but certainly not least, the organics diversion requirement for food-permitted businesses could do more in regards to the food waste hierarchy. As the manager for

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many years of in.gredients, a zero waste neighborhood grocer on Manor, I'm well aware of the concept of highest and best use. We put a lot of thought and effort into designing a store that prioritizes "source reduction." While most businesses can't be expected to follow our example, we can hold other food businesses accountable to a hierarchy that puts "feeding people" above "compost." Currently, businesses are allowed to elect their diversion strategy without any incentives or penalties for pursuing highest and best use. With one in four Austin families struggling with food insecurity, it's our moral imperative to divert as much of our uneaten food as possible to people who really need it.

Resources

Austin Resource Recovery "2015 Diversion Study": <https://www.austintexas.gov/2015DiversionStudy>

Zero Waste Advisory Commission: <https://www.austintexas.gov/zwac>

in.gredients: <https://in.gredients.com>

Austin Resource Recovery "2014 Diversion Study": https://www.austintexas.gov/Final_Report_-_Austin_City-Serviced_Waste_Characterization_Study_2015-04-14.pdf

"Food For All: An Inclusive Look at Neighborhood Food Planning": <https://www.austintexas.gov/blog/food-all-inclusive-look-neighborhood-food-planning>

Josh Blaine served as the General Manager of in.gredients, a zero waste neighborhood grocer on Manor Road, for many years. Currently he does their bookkeeping and business development. In.gredients averages about 6 pounds of trash sent to the landfill per month, which is about what Austinites average per day as individuals. The diversion rate for in.gredients is estimated to be above 99%. Currently the store is running a crowdfunding campaign to combat rising property taxes and other rising costs of doing business. You can find out more about their waste practices and crowdfunding campaign at <https://in.gredients.com>.

Josh also serves as Ora Houston's District 1 appointee to the City's Zero Waste Advisory Commission, where he chairs the Construction and Demolition Committee. Additionally, Josh is a Co-Founder and President of the Manor Road Merchants Association, a part of the new Soul-y Austin program. So far the Merchants Association has garnered 16 member businesses along Manor Road between IH-35 and Airport Boulevard. They're currently working with the City to bring infrastructure and place-making improvements to the corridor.

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