

Aiming for zero waste:

ten steps to get started at the local level

Every community is different. There is no one way to prevent, reduce, reuse, recycle, or compost discarded materials. For instance, manual sorting of recyclables may be appropriate in one community and not in another. The ten steps listed below are applicable to most if not all communities interested in pursuing a zero waste future. A community group or local government can take any step to get started. These steps are not mutually exclusive. Integrating community participation in decision-making will enhance the success of any discard management program. This plan can be adopted at the community, municipal, or national level, depending on which approach will yield the best results in each situation. Also, one can work with many communities to adopt local zero waste goals, and the momentum generated can lead towards an eventual citywide or even national goal.

1. Adopt a non-incineration discard management plan. Better yet call it a resource management plan and embrace zero waste as a vision for the future. Make waste prevention, reuse, repair, recycling, and composting the heart of the plan. Adopt waste elimination goals as well as recycling goals. Provide leadership, dialogue, and information on how to move toward a zero waste economy. Decide against privatizing and centralizing waste systems. Seek public input to build broad public support for waste reduction programs and build a network of stakeholders to be involved in the design and implementation of the programs. Make community participation meaningful.

2. Decentralize waste management by building on local community initiatives using local resources and accommodating the informal sector. Community projects do not need to be relegated to local small efforts. Replicate and expand successful community initiatives. Provide them with an institutional structure that will allow them to thrive and become mainstream (for example, earmark land for composting activities). Allow for decentralized functioning and community efforts rather than an emphasis on one central initiative to solve all waste problems.

3. Target a wide range of materials for reuse, recycling, and composting (especially several grades of paper and all types of organics) and **keep these materials segregated** at the source from mixed trash to maintain quality and enhance diversion levels.

4. Compost. Composting is key to achieving 50% and higher diversion levels and doing so cost-effectively. Keeping organics and putrescibles out of landfills will make landfills less of a nuisance and source of pollution. Emphasize backyard or at-home composting followed by community composting. Target many types of clean organic materials and offer year-round, frequent, and convenient collection.

5. Make program participation convenient and meaningful. The more households and businesses participating, the more materials diverted from disposal. More people will reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost if programs are convenient, easy, and simple. Some ways to make programs convenient include:

- providing curbside or door-to-door collection of recyclables with the same frequency curbside collection of trash is provided;
- providing seasonal and frequent collection of yard trimmings;
- offering service to all households including multi-family dwellings;
- utilizing set-out and collection methods that encourage resident participation as well as yield high-quality, readily marketable materials (such as using large bins for commingled food and beverage containers, and separate set-outs for paper grades);
- providing adequate containers for storage and set-out of recyclables; and
- establishing drop-off sites to augment door-to-door collection (such as at disposal facilities if residents or businesses self-haul trash and at decentralized locations around the community).

6. Institute economic incentives that reward waste reduction and recovery over disposal, such as reduced tipping fees for delivering recyclable and compostable materials to drop-off sites, tax incentives to encourage businesses and haulers to recycle, and pay-as-you-throw fees for trash collection. Eliminate any subsidies for waste burning.

7. Enact or push for policies and regulations to improve the environment for recycling and recycling-based businesses. These might include:

- Banning waste incineration. Incinerators compete for the same materials and financial resources as waste reduction strategies and encourage wasting.
- Banning products that cannot be reused, repaired, recycled, or composted.
- Requiring residents and businesses participate in recycling and composting programs. Local ordinances can either require residents and businesses to source-separate or ban them from setting out designated recyclable or compostable materials with their trash. Retain authority over the collection and handling of municipal discards so that haulers undertake, encourage, and invest in recycling
- Banning recyclable and reusable materials and products from landfills and incinerators.
- Banning single-use disposable products from public events and festivals and as many other places as possible.
- Instituting or expanding existing beverage container deposit systems. Amend laws to require refillable containers.
- Establishing recycling market development zones with incentives to create industrial parks for reuse, recycling, and composting firms.
- Instituting building policies that require reuse and recovery of building materials in new construction and in building deconstruction projects. Establishing a municipal, regional, or national disposal surcharge (funds could be used to establish a Solid Waste Reduction, Recycling, Composting Authority that awards grants and loans to industry and nonprofit recycling operations).
- Supporting state and national mandates and goals, which can be very effective in increasing recycling levels. In the United States, state waste reduction goals, requirements, and policies encourage governments at the local level to implement waste reduction programs. State beverage container deposit laws and landfill bans on recyclables materials have, for instance, provided recycling-based businesses with needed materials.
- Supporting state and national policies that will help ensure the prices we pay for our goods and services reflect the true cost of providing them. Policies ending subsidies for virgin material extraction and taxing polluting industries are examples.
- Enacting a Toxics Use Reduction Act to encourage industries to reduce the use of toxic materials in their processes and products.

8. Develop markets for materials with an eye toward closing the loop locally (that is, within the local economy), producing high-value end products, and linking recycling-based economic development with a larger vision of sustainable community development. Minimum recycled-content policies, grant and loan programs, and recycling market development zones have encouraged the development of recycling-based manufacturing. Acquire public property for reuse, recycling, and composting in order to provide a stable land base for eco-industrial parks and reuse and recycling facilities. Support local nonprofit or for-profit mission-driven recyclers and reuse operations and the informal recycling sector. Community-based recyclers are in business for the good of the community and often provide services that the market undervalues. The informal sector likewise provides undervalued services and often does so free of charge to waste generators and local government. Implement or expand procurement of recycled-content products. If you're not buying recycled, you're not recycling.

9. Work to hold manufacturers responsible for their products throughout their life-cycle. Local government can press for extended producer responsibility (EPR) at the state and national levels. In particular press for state and national efforts to work with manufacturers to voluntarily reduce packaging and meet minimum recycled-content standards for products and packaging. If goals are not met, push for institution of a regulatory framework. Local government can pass producer responsibility resolutions calling on producers to share the responsibility for their products and on state and national legislatures to shift the burden of managing discarded products and packaging from local governments to the producers of those products. Local government can also pass local ordinances banning use and/or sale of certain types of products and packaging that cannot be reused, repaired, recycled, or composted.

10. Educate, educate, educate. Education and outreach is critical. Educational and technical assistance programs provide residents and businesses with information about “how” and “why” to reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost. Launch a public information campaign that will allow consumers to make smart choices when making purchases. Public education campaigns can also highlight the environmental and economic benefits of preventing, reusing, and recycling discards and connect the role these activities play in moving toward a sustainable economy.

Source: Brenda Platt, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Washington, D.C., U.S., 2004.

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