

**TESTIMONY TO COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION & THE ENVIRONMENT****B22-501 - Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017****Position: Support****December 7th, 2017 Public Hearing**

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your leadership in making the District a more sustainable and livable city. I am testifying today to support B22-501 - Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017.

My name is Brenda Platt and I am the co-director of the Washington, DC-based nonprofit, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR), and head up its Composting for Community Program. I have worked 31 years on solid waste issues and authored numerous reports on waste incineration, reuse, recycling, composting, and zero waste planning, including the *State of Composting in the U.S.: What, Why, Where, & How* as well as *Growing Local Fertility: A Guide to Community Composting*. While we are a national organization, we have worked in our hometown, DC, since our founding in 1974. In 2014, we launched our Neighborhood Soil Rebuilders composter training program in the DC region. This program and its graduates have supported community compost sites at Howard University, Project EDEN, EW Stokes Charter School, the East Capitol Urban Farm, and other community gardens. We have collaborated with the DC Department of Parks & Recreation (DPR) to incorporate parts of our training into its urban master composter course, and I am the compost manager and trainer for one of DPR's 46 community compost cooperatives. I also co-chair the waste working group for the Sustainable DC Plan update.

This week my team at ILSR finished *The 2017 Residential Food Waste Collection Access Study* for BioCycle magazine, which documents the growth in government supported programs to recover food waste via curbside and drop-off programs. I am pleased to share that DC's two food waste drop-off programs are featured – both the Compost Cooperative Network program operated by DPR as well the Public Works Department program launched this year at farmers markets with Compost Cab.

Most relevant to today's hearing is our latest research on home composting programs, to be published in our forthcoming report, *Avoid the Curb: Guide to Home Composting Programs*. The report features a wide range of home composting programs led by local government in 11 communities, including Orlando and Miami-Dade County, Florida; New York City; Austin; Seattle; Los Angeles; and Napa, California. Appended to my written testimony is our *Hierarchy to Reduce Food Waste & Grow Community*. We prioritize home composting over residential curbside collection precisely because it does avoid the curb, which in turn saves hauling expenses and tip fees at processing facilities while enhancing residential soils. One-third of a ton can conservatively be composted at home per household per year. That can add up to a lot of savings for the City. One key finding of our report is that programs need to carry out three tasks: (1) make home composting bins more accessible to residents, (2) provide composting education and information, and (3) raise awareness of the benefits of composting. The best programs offer training coupled with free or discounted home composting bins.

As an organization offering compost training, we know that training is key to success. Composting is not rocket science but there are certain things to know and understand and any DC training needs to include

how to avoid unwanted critters. Education can generally improve poor practices that are the root of most composting-related nuisances. Studies have shown that the main reason people will not start composting is that they lack confidence in their abilities and/or falsely believe that composting is always smelly and messy. The programs in Napa, Los Angeles, and Austin have all proven that many will participate even if training is required.

We applaud the Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017 for stipulating both training and financial incentives. We have a few suggestions for strengthening the Act:

- Allow residents to be eligible for a discounted bin immediately after they successfully complete home composting training. Napa, New York City, Miami-Dade County have all done this.
- Offer home composting vouchers up to \$75, in addition to rebates. The City of Austin started its home composting program with \$75 rebates. After a couple years of collecting feedback on the program, Austin decided that potential participants were deterred by the need to pay the money upfront for the composting bin before receiving the rebate. As a result, Austin decided to start offering residents the choice to obtain a \$75 voucher after completing a composting workshop that could be redeemed towards home composting bins at various participating retailers.
- Restrict the vouchers and rebates to pre-selected bins. San Diego does this. Administration policy could clarify which bins qualify and could specifically list bins that work well for avoiding unwanted critters (we are not suggesting the Act stipulate the specific bins but rather clarify that the bins qualifying for the incentives will be on a pre-approved list).
- The Act could include language requiring the Administration to provide educational materials (separate from the training). Minneapolis does this as follows:
Educational materials. The city shall prepare and distribute informational materials to assist persons wishing to conduct source-separated organic composting in an efficient manner that minimizes public nuisance conditions.
- Specifically name vermicomposting (worm composting) as a type of home composting to be covered by the Act, the voucher/rebate, and the training.
- To be successful, composting needs a balance of nitrogen-rich materials (like food scraps) and carbon-rich materials (like wood chips and fall leaves). Consider adding to the Act a requirement that the District will pilot a program to make available carbon-rich materials (including leaves, wood chips, and shredded paper) for composting at home and community gardens.
- Allow the Administration to require residents found to be in violation of home composting regulations to take composting training as a condition for continuing to compost. Minneapolis does this. (Sample language: *Those composting on their property who fail to compost in a way that does not promote the propagation, harborage, or attraction of vectors, or the creation of public nuisances may be required to attend a home composting workshop as a condition of continuing to compost on a subject property.*)
- Consider requiring the Administration to collect data, evaluate and report periodically on effectiveness of the home composting program, in order to spur continuous improvement.
- Instead of stipulating the Mayor issue rules, allow the DPW to issue Director's policy. We understand that rules can take years. A home composting program shouldn't get mired in red tape.
- Consider renaming Act "Home Composting Incentives Amendment Act" as "residential composting" may be confused with the planned residential curbside collection program.

We look forward to working with the City Council and Administration to advance successful home composting. Thank you for this opportunity to provide input.

Addendum: Highlights from Other Community Programs

Vouchers and Rebates

ILSR recommends that the Residential Composting Incentives Amendment Act of 2017 offer home composting vouchers in addition to rebates (Option 1) and/or provide discounted bins for residents to pick up immediately after completing composting training (Option 2).

Option 1 - Offer a voucher in addition to the rebate.

- Austin's program history shows why vouchers should also be offered.
 - Austin started its home composting program by offering \$75 rebates. After a couple years of collecting feedback on the program, Austin decided that potential participants were deterred by the need to pay the money upfront for the composting bin before receiving the rebate. Therefore, Austin decided to start offering residents the choice to obtain a \$75 voucher after completing a composting workshop that could be redeemed towards home composting bins at various participating retailers throughout Austin.
- Some cities restrict bin options and others allow freedom of choice. We recommend specifying in the director policy/rules which bins qualify for the vouchers/rebates.
- San Diego (Restricts bin options)
 - Residents fill out application online and receive voucher usable at a participating local home/garden chain
 - Training available but not required to get voucher
 - Soil Saver - 47.99 + tax (after \$30 voucher)
 - Can-O-Worms from Triformis Corporation - \$59.99 + tax (after \$40 voucher)
 - Terra Dual Batch Composter from Algreen - \$129.99 + tax (after \$50 voucher)
- Miami-Dade County (Restricts bin options)
 - Residents can take a free composting workshop to receive a voucher redeemable for a free Earth Machine composting bin that can be picked up at a Solid Waste Department location
- Austin (Allows residents to pick a composting bin)
 - Residents take composting class and pass test to get a rebate or voucher (redeemable for up to \$75 or the full price of the bin, whichever is lowest)
 - Vouchers/rebates can be used on any bin
 - The rebate can be used for a bin purchased from any retailer
 - The voucher must be used at participating local home/garden stores in Austin

Option 2 - Offer discounted bins for immediate pick-up after completion of training.

- Los Angeles requires training and allows residents to pick up one of the following after completion
 - Soil Saver - \$40
 - Can-O-Worms - \$65 with worms
- Napa County requires training and allows residents to pick up one of the following after completion
 - Soil Saver - \$20
 - Earth Machine - \$20
 - Rebate - \$30 towards a worm composting bin, a lawn mower retrofit, or a mulching lawnmower

Training/Education/Technical Assistance

- Minneapolis residential composting ordinance includes sections that:
 - Allow the director to require residents found to be in violation of home composting regulations to take composting training as a condition for continuing to compost ([see Section 244.770 part i¹](#))
 - Require the City to provide educational materials beyond training ([part h](#))
 - *Educational materials. The city shall prepare and distribute informational materials to assist persons wishing to conduct source-separated organic composting in an efficient manner that minimizes public nuisance conditions.*
- Orlando provides a hotline to call for troubleshooting or to complain about a neighbor. Orlando's sustainability project manager, Ian Jurgensen, runs the City's composting program and also answers these calls. He visits the homes and troubleshoots the compost bins.
- San Diego contracts with a nonprofit
 - The City contracts with Solana Center (nonprofit) to provide the free 2-hour in-person training for residents and also to give the Master Composter Course and maintain a composting hotline (called the Rotline)
- Vancouver contracts with nonprofit City Farmer
 - City Farmer maintains a composting hotline, a composting information site, a composting demonstration site, and teaches the worm bin workshops required to get a subsidized worm bin
 - Vancouver pays instructors \$40/hr for workshops. The City does not fully pay for all of the services, the contract just helps to offset some of City Farmer's operating costs.

¹Language from Minneapolis:

Abatement. All compost containers and/or compost materials not in compliance with this section shall be declared a public nuisance and are subject to abatement as provided in Chapter 227 of this Code. In addition, the director may require individuals whose compost containers and/or materials are not in compliance with this section to attend a Master Composter or similar educational program as a condition of continuing to compost on a subject property.

Hierarchy to Reduce Food Waste and Grow Community

