



sanitation

Edward Grayson Commissioner

Testimony of Edward Grayson, Commissioner New York City Department of Sanitation

Oversight Hearing on Advancements in Residential and Commercial Solid Waste Management Systems

New York City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management

**Tuesday, November 16, 2021
10:00 A.M.**

Good morning Chair Reynoso and members of the City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management. I am Edward Grayson, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important topic. With me this afternoon are Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Recycling and Sustainability, and Gregory Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Policy and External Affairs at the Department.

First, I want to thank you, Chair Reynoso, for your leadership, advocacy, and support over the last eight years as chair of this committee. You have been a key partner in our efforts to reform the commercial waste sector, to promote environmental justice, and to chart a path to zero waste for New York City. The Department looks forward to continuing this work as you take your new role as Brooklyn Borough President.

I also want to thank all of the outgoing members of the City Council, particularly those who have served on this committee, for their service to their communities and to the City of New York. You have been true partners in our work to keep New York City healthy, safe and clean. And lastly I want to thank all of those here to testify today – advocates, industry experts, citizens and others.

In this Administration, we have made transformative change to our waste management sector. We have invested in new facilities that embrace sustainable transportation and provide relief to communities that have carried the burden of our waste for decades. We have created new and expanded programs to divert an ever-growing assortment of products from landfills – and give them life. And we have enacted policies to reduce our reliance on plastics and reform the commercial waste sector.

In my testimony today, I will highlight a few of these achievements and some of the greatest opportunities we face in the next several years, as we look to work with a new Administration, a new City Council and all of our stakeholder to continue our important work to keep our City healthy, safe and clean. Afterwards, my team and I will be happy to answer your questions.

New York City's Residential Waste Management System

The Department's more than 6,000 Sanitation Workers collect an average of 12,000 tons of waste – refuse, recyclables and organics – every day. Our residential waste system is built upon their work, nearly all of it manual and physical labor. Twice or three times each week, residents and property managers bring their waste out to the curb, in bags and in bins, and it is collected at the hands of our Sanitation Workers. Because of the nature of our City – densely built diverse neighborhoods and conflicting demands for space both in buildings and in the public sphere, we have relied on this same approach, with some small variations, for over a century.

In the last several years, we have employed innovative approaches to improve our collection operations and service delivery. These include new technology systems for routing, operations management, and resource tracking, as well as collection methods using dual-bin and specialty trucks to increase our operational flexibility in the rollout of curbside compost collection and other programs.

The Department is also exploring new models for waste setout and collection, including approaches that will move waste setout from the sidewalk and into the roadway. This month, we are releasing a procurement to select MWBE vendors to test the Clean Curbs model for residential waste on a small scale, potentially the first in a series of pilots that will inform our future planning.

Next month, we will unveil a pilot network of "Smart Bins," unstaffed and automated food scrap drop-off bins controlled with a smart phone or RFID card. These hold the promise of an expanded network of drop-off sites in parts of the City not yet served by curbside composting. Also next month, we will promulgate final rules requiring new large residential buildings to develop a waste management plan for review by DSNY when submitting their building permit application to the Department of Buildings.

Refuse is delivered to one of eight export facilities – rail or marine transfer stations that containerize the waste in sealed shipping containers for transport to disposal facilities upstate or in other states on the East Coast. These facilities, developed as part of our 20-year comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan, reflect a shift away from refuse export by long-haul truck and a commitment to borough equity in managing garbage.

After the closure of the Fresh Kills landfill, almost all of New York City's refuse was exported by long-haul truck from privately-operated transfer stations. Because of the city's zoning and siting restrictions, these private transfer stations are predominately located in three neighborhoods in North Brooklyn, Southeast Queens, and the South Bronx. The rail and barge-based transfer stations built by DSNY as part of the SWMP have dramatically reduced truck traffic associated with refuse collection and hauling in these historically overburdened communities.

Together, these new facilities along with the use of an existing energy-from-waste facility in New Jersey make up a resilient and reliable network to export refuse. They also have allowed the City to permanently reduce permitted capacity at transfer stations in historically overburdened communities. In total, the SWMP has reduced truck traffic associated with waste export by more than 60 million miles per year, including more than 5 million miles in and around New York City, and slashed greenhouse gas emissions by 34,000 tons annually.

Zero Waste Programs

In 2015, the City established a goal of sending Zero Waste to Landfills, building off the Department's robust curbside recycling program and several other diversion programs. In the last eight years, DSNY has built a foundation of programs, policies, and critical technical support and community engagement approaches to move toward that goal. However, as we have discussed in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted our steady progress, and we are working to restore and expand programs to get back on track toward this goal.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions from solid waste involves reducing the volume of waste generated, collecting and beneficially using food and yard waste, and increasing reuse and recycling of remaining materials. To achieve our zero waste goal, the Department will continue to evolve our current diversion programs while advancing new, improved and expanded programs that target recyclables, organics, textiles, electronics, household items and other non-recyclable waste. We will do this in close partnership with other city agencies to ensure policy and programmatic alignment with waste management in the context of the city's built environment and public spaces.

Collections of traditional recycling – metal, glass, plastic and cartons and commingled paper and cardboard – have increased from 548,000 tons in FY 2014 to 686,000 tons in FY 2021, an increase of more than 25 percent. As a result of substantial investment in processing infrastructure in NYC, including at the Sims recycling facility in Sunset Park and the Pratt paper mill on Staten Island, we have the capacity to take on and recycle even more material moving forward and to adapt to the changing composition of our recycling stream. Long term contracts with local processing facilities contracts have insulated NYC from the worst impacts of market disruptions and international trade restrictions that forced some other municipalities to curtail or suspend their recycling programs.

Organic waste, including food scraps and yard waste, is the most significant contributor of waste-related greenhouse gas emissions – and is also the largest fraction of New York City's waste stream, one third in total. This material represents a significant opportunity to reduce emissions from landfilled waste by diverting this material for beneficial use and carbon capture including composting and anaerobic digestion, and in the case specifically of food waste, to minimize it at the source.

Over the last decade, DSNY has grown to be a national leader in providing drop-off opportunities to compost food scraps. Earlier this month, we expanded the program to more than 200 sites citywide – the largest in the program's history – including at least one in every community board. As I mentioned earlier, we are also working to pilot "Smart Bins" to expand access to drop-off composting in neighborhoods without curbside collection.

Last month, DSNY restarted curbside compost collection, which had been suspended last year due to the fiscal crisis. This new iteration of the program allows buildings and residents to sign up and express interest in receiving weekly curbside composting service. Enrollment opened in August, and we have received more than 51,000 unique signups to date, representing over 36,000 addresses that hold 900,000 households. We currently offer service to residents in Brooklyn Community Board 6, and we will add six additional districts at the beginning of December (Manhattan CBs 6 and 7; Brooklyn CBs 1, 2 and 7; and Bronx CB 8). We plan to add additional districts to the program in the Spring, as resources permit.

The Department has also dramatically expanded non-curbside services to promote the reuse and recycling of other products, including the DonateNYC, RefashionNYC, and E-cycleNYC programs. Since 2014, these programs have diverted more than 400,000 tons of waste for reuse or recycling. Today, free on-call apartment building pickup are provided to more than 922,000 households for electronics recycling, and more than 200,000 households and hundreds of commercial and institutional facilities for textiles reuse. And these programs continue to grow.

In addition, the Department, in partnership with the City Council, has taken steps to reduce the most problematic types of waste, particularly single-use plastics. The Department has implemented bans on food service foam products and plastic bags, along with a fee on paper bags. And we are currently working to implement legislation to reduce the use of plastic straws and stirrers, which went into effect two weeks ago. We look forward to working with the City Council to enact and implement additional policies to reduce the use of hard-to-recycle and single-use products, in favor of reusable, recyclable and compostable alternatives.

Diversion rates vary widely between Community Boards, but over the past eight years, the number of Community Boards with a less than 10% diversion rate has decreased from 12 in FY13 to 2 in FY21. During this period, technical assistance provided by DSNY and its partners to building management companies, schools, NYCHA and agency facilities has shown to be an important tool to increase capacity and apply best practices to separate recyclables for DSNY collection.

Commercial Waste Management System

The City's commercial waste system has also seen advancements during this Administration. Commercial waste is collected by private carters that are licensed and registered by the Business Integrity Commission and is disposed at private transfer stations permitted by the Department and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. The City has embarked on a comprehensive reform of this commercial waste management system, first with the Waste Equity law, enacted in partnership with City Council in 2018, and Commercial Waste Zones, which we announced major progress on earlier this morning.

In August 2018, City Council passed and Mayor de Blasio signed Local Law 152, also known as the Waste Equity Law. This law required the Department to reduce the permitted capacity of private transfer stations in four designated community districts historically overburdened by waste management trucks and infrastructure. The Department implemented these reductions from October 2019 through September 2020. In total, DSNY reduced private transfer station capacity by more than 10,000 tons in these four districts, dramatically reducing the amount of waste that can pass through them. This will encourage a shift toward more fair and equitable distribution of waste management infrastructure in NYC.

The total amount of waste handled at private transfer stations in NYC decreased from an average of 19,102 tons per day in calendar year 2019 to 15,912 tons per day in calendar year 2020. While some portion of this decrease is attributable to the permitted capacity reductions imposed under LL152, it is likely that a greater share of the decrease is attributable to the disruption to the commercial waste market associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department will continue to assess the impacts of this law on flows of commercial waste as the City continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2019, Mayor de Blasio signed Local Law 199, requiring the establishment of Commercial Waste Zones throughout New York City. The result of years of planning, analysis, and

stakeholder engagement, the Commercial Waste Zones program will create a safe and efficient commercial waste collection system that advances the City's climate and zero waste goals while providing high-quality, low-cost service to NYC businesses.

The Department began the competitive procurement process by issuing Part 1 of a Request for Proposals (RFP) in November 2020. Part 1 of the RFP requested information regarding specific business, character, financial and licensing requirements. Part 2 of the RFP was released earlier today and requests the proposers plans related to zero waste, operations, waste management, health and safety, and customer service, as well as pricing.

The Department also promulgated several rules to implement the program, including rules governing customer service, operations, health and safety, recycling and organics collection and other administrative requirements. After considering extensive public comments and testimony, the Department published final rules covering these areas in the City Record earlier today. We expect the transition period to the new zone system to begin in 2022 and last up to two years.

The FY 2022 Budget provides \$4.0 million in funding to support the implementation of Commercial Waste Zones. This includes funding for 28 new civilian staff, including several already on-board now or scheduled to start in the coming weeks. It also includes OTPS funds for implementation support, communications, outreach, and IT systems, and DSNY is fully resourced to pursue this important program. We look forward to working with the City Council and all stakeholders as we advance this important program to bring much-needed reform to the City's commercial waste sector.

Looking Forward

Our work on these important topics is far from done. We continue to expand and hone our programs, invest in new technologies and infrastructure, and work to improve the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of our waste management systems.

The Department is currently planning for an updated waste characterization study, due to be released in early 2024, which will inform the planning for our updated comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan in 2026. And we are providing input to expansion of state and federal policies that can unlock critical investment to further expand our sustainable waste management efforts, such as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act signed into law by President Biden yesterday and New York State's growing portfolio of expanded producer responsibility laws, which increase investment in critical waste management capacity and provide financial support for the critical role municipalities play in sustainable waste management services.

We are pleased to discuss these topics with you today, and to continue these conversations in the future with a broad set of stakeholders, including the incoming members of the City Council. And we look forward to working with the incoming Administration and our partner agencies on the 2023 update to PlaNYC and OneNYC, the City's strategic sustainability blueprints.

In closing, I wish to once again thank Chair Reynoso, and all of the members of this committee for your continuing support. You are critical advocates as we work to keep New York City healthy, safe, and clean, and ensure the long-term sustainability of our communities. We are grateful for your commitment.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify this morning, and my staff and I are now happy to answer your questions.