

# A WASTED OPPORTUNITY

**NEW YORK CITY'S COMMERCIAL RECYCLING RATE DECLINED LAST YEAR, AND HAULERS TRUCKED 200,000 ADDITIONAL TONS TO LANDFILLS**

**OUR COMMERCIAL RECYCLING RATE IS ONE-THIRD THAT OF LEADING U.S. CITIES**



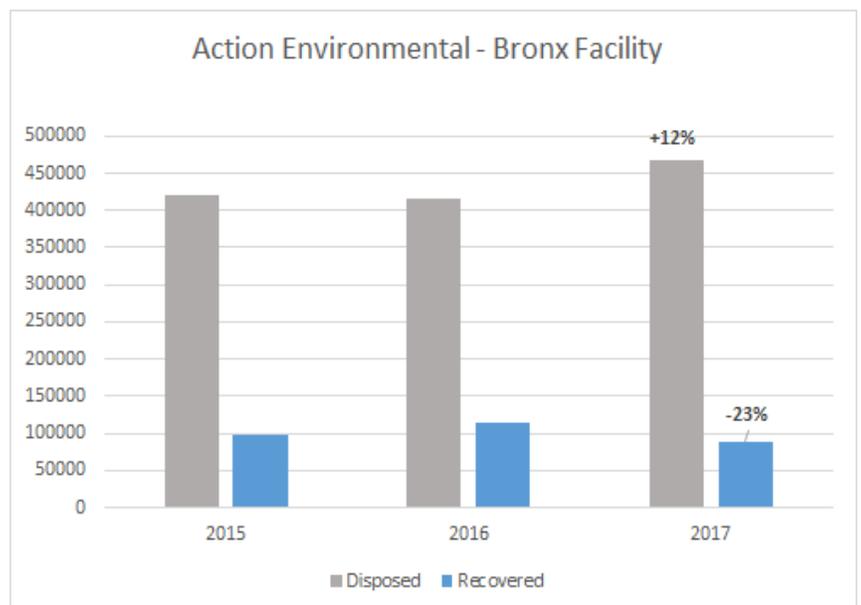
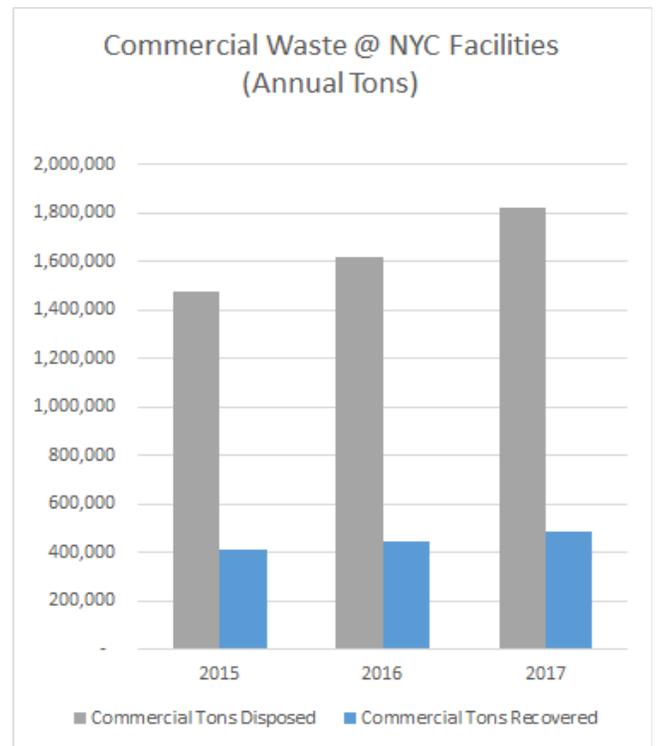
# THE NYC WASTE INDUSTRY IS MOVING BACKWARD ON RECYCLING

Despite the enforcement of new commercial recycling and composting rules intended to make recycling easier and more transparent for New York City businesses, the private waste industry sent significantly more waste to landfills in 2017 compared with the previous year, and failed to increase recycling. This backward trend in the commercial sector, which accounts for about one-third of the city's total waste stream, threatens to prevent the city from meeting its goal of zero waste by 2030, and is a major missed opportunity to create new, green jobs in recycling.

**“Even New York City’s supposedly “greenest” private sanitation companies recycled less and landfilled more last year.”**

Based on a review of official reports from the approximately 30 New York City waste and recycling facilities that process commercial waste in the five boroughs, Transform Don't Trash NYC finds that the industry continues to report recycling a disappointing 21% of the commercial trade waste stream.<sup>1</sup> Because our estimate relies on figures that the industry self-reports to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the actual amounts of material recycled may be even lower. Driving the declining commercial recycling rate is an increase in disposed commercial waste. In 2017, New York City waste transfer stations trucked an additional 200,000 tons of commercial waste to landfills and incinerators compared with the previous year - a troubling 22% increase since 2015.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, residential curbside refuse collections increased by only 1% since 2015 according to the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY).<sup>3</sup>

Even New York City's supposedly "greenest" private sanitation companies recycled less and landfilled more last year. DEC reports show that Action Environmental, the City's largest hauler, recycled 23% less material at its Bronx recycling facility than the previous year, while trucking 12% more waste to distant landfills in upstate New York and Pennsylvania.



## LOCAL AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The practice of landfilling waste - and food waste in particular - is a major source of methane gas emissions. It also exacerbates local air pollution and public safety risks, particularly in low-income communities and communities of color such as North Brooklyn, the South Bronx, Southeast Queens, and Southwest Brooklyn, where waste transfer stations and their associated diesel collection and long-haul trucks are concentrated. Ultimately, much of this waste ends up in other environmental justice communities in upstate New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia that are burdened with the environmental harms of landfills and incinerators. Both commercial waste reduction and increased recycling will be critical if New York is to meet its targets of sending zero waste to landfill by 2030 and reducing emissions by 80% by 2050.



## A ZONED COMMERCIAL WASTE SYSTEM IS NEEDED TO BOOST DIVERSION

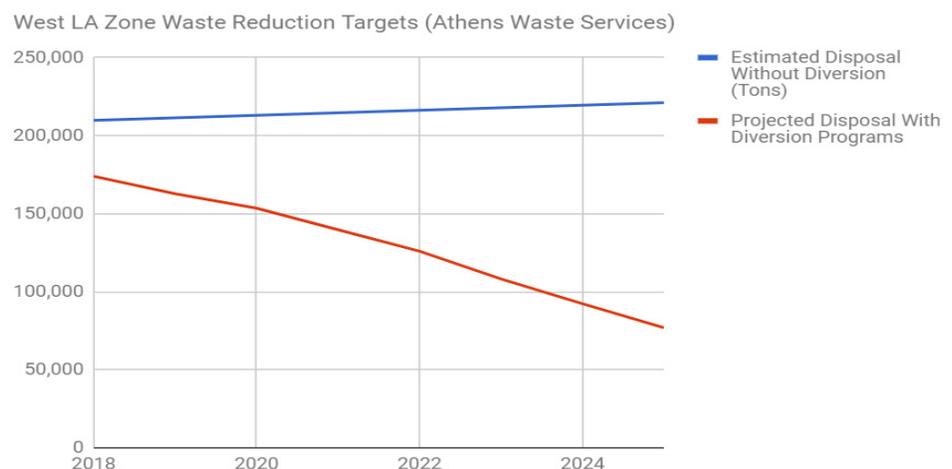
These new findings show that current regulations and voluntary commitments from sanitation companies are woefully inadequate to reduce waste and raise recycling rates. The commercial waste zone system, currently being developed by DSNY and expected to take full effect in 2022, can give City regulators the authority, and sanitation companies the accountability, necessary to reduce the huge amounts of commercial waste trucked to landfills and incinerators.

In contrast to NYC waste haulers - who are not held to any waste reduction goals - haulers operating under exclusive waste zones in other cities are contractually responsible for meeting disposal reduction goals, and are incentivized through financial penalties and bonuses to reduce the amounts of waste going to landfills in each zone. For example, each commercial hauler in Los Angeles is now responsible for measuring, tracking, and reducing the amount of waste generated by all of the customers within the zone to which they are assigned. After establishing a baseline measure of disposed waste from each zone, haulers will need to reduce this amount by 43% by the year 2025 through initiatives such as food rescue, intensive customer education, and expanded composting and recycling programs, or face substantial financial penalties.

Since implementing the zoned collection system in early 2018, Los Angeles has begun to divert large quantities of edible food from landfills, and greatly increased the amount of source separated recyclables being collected by haulers. Similar contractual incentives for haulers have been used in San Jose and Seattle, which have reported commercial diversion rates as high as 77% and 64% respectively in recent years. To reduce waste disposal and increase recycling as rapidly as possible, New York City should structure its zoned commercial waste system as an exclusive zone system, with one carefully selected hauler responsible for reducing the amount of disposed waste from the commercial customers in each zone. Strategies to decrease disposal should include:

- Intensive and ongoing customer education and waste stream analysis
- Partnerships and subcontracts with food rescue groups and local recyclers, particularly those that can efficiently serve small businesses
- Major investments in organic waste processing and recycling facilities
- Pricing structures that incentivize customers to properly source-separate recyclable materials and organic waste, and to adopt waste reduction strategies

The predictable revenue and extended amortization for new infrastructure under an exclusive system will allow private carters to secure the necessary financing to make these infrastructure investments, and create local green jobs in the process.



## ILLEGAL COMMINGLING BY HAULERS

Many New York City business owners surveyed by Transform Don't Trash NYC have noted that they instruct their staff to carefully separate designated recyclable materials such as glass, metal, and plastic containers from the waste stream, only to observe that private haulers throw recyclables into the same trucks as black-bag waste on late-night collection routes.

This practice is illegal under NYC commercial recycling rules that took effect in July 2016, which are intended to reduce the contamination of source-separated recyclable materials such as paper, cardboard, and plastics with non-recyclable materials and contaminants such as food waste or grease. Although the commercial waste industry has bemoaned the downturn in China's market for recyclable materials, the cause of this market disruption was China's stringent new limits on the amount of contamination in imported recycled waste that it is willing to accept. (To be sure, China's new policy has hampered recycling markets for some commodities, particularly on the West Coast. But over the long-term, China's actions should serve to stimulate the creation of new markets for recyclables here in the United States.)

Unfortunately, some NYC private haulers continue to openly commingle recyclable commodities and black-bag putrescible waste, which can cause contamination, or indicate that source-separated recyclables are simply being landfilled. These are photographs of commercial waste trucks in which black-bag garbage and commercial recyclables (in clear or blue bags) are mixed.



Clockwise from upper left:

Commingled recyclables and garbage in an Action Carting truck; March 2018.

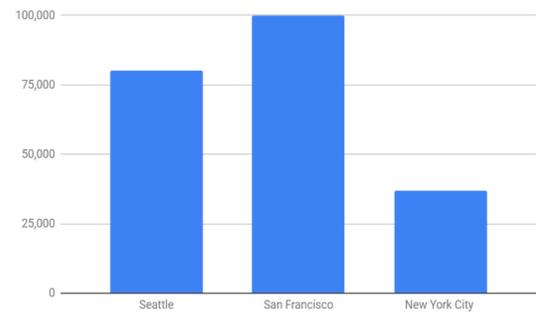
Commingled recyclables and garbage in a GPB Waste truck; October 2017.

Commingled recyclables and garbage in a Royal Waste Truck; December 2017.

# INDUSTRY DRAGS ITS FEET ON ORGANICS

The waste industry's ongoing failure to meet the city's urgent need for organic waste recycling services continues to suppress the commercial recycling rate. Although more than one-third of disposed commercial waste is estimated to be food scraps and other compostable or digestible organic material,<sup>4</sup> NYC commercial transfer stations reported sending less than one percent of the material to composting or digestion facilities, and most of these organics appear to be from DSNY residential and school collections rather than from commercial businesses. Despite having only a fraction of New York City's population, high-diversion cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and San Jose recover far more organic waste for composting and digestion than the entire New York City commercial sector. In 2017, San Francisco's exclusive hauler reported recovering almost 100,000 tons of compostable waste from that city's commercial accounts alone,<sup>5</sup> and Seattle's haulers recovered more than 80,000 tons of compostable waste from the city's commercial businesses.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, New York City's giant transfer station industry reported recovering only 37,000 tons of food scraps and yard waste from the residential and business sector combined.

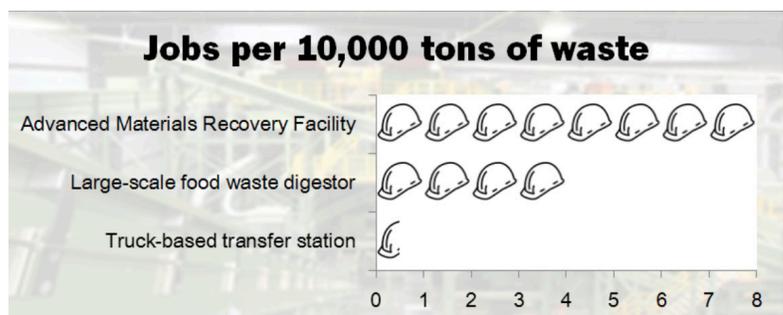
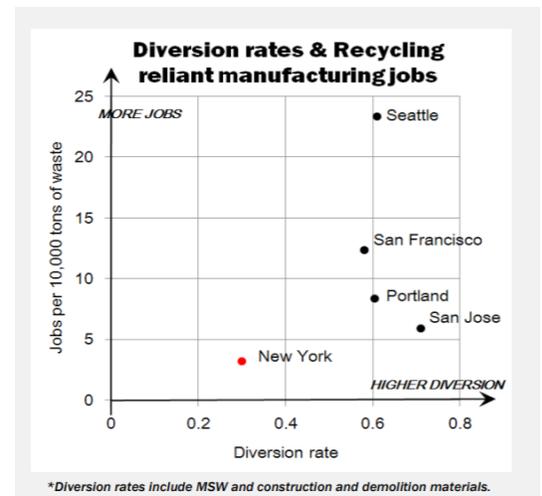
Compostable Material Recovered, 2017



# A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR JOB CREATION

The trend toward increased disposal by commercial waste companies is a major missed economic opportunity for our city, since recycling and composting have been shown to create five to twenty times more jobs per ton of waste than simply trucking waste to landfills.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, NYC lags far behind high-diversion cities in creating local collection and processing jobs for recyclable waste and organics. In New York City, thousands of new permanent and temporary jobs could be created if our industry were to invest in the collection systems, materials recovery facilities, customer education initiatives, and organics recycling infrastructure necessary to reduce the contamination of recyclables, and put massive quantities of compostable organic waste to beneficial uses including energy generation and fertilizer production.<sup>8</sup>



## METHODOLOGY

Transfer stations, recycling facilities, and compost facilities permitted by New York State are required to submit annual reports to the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation including quantities of waste received, disposed, and recovered and the destinations of disposed and recovered materials.<sup>9</sup>

Since 2015, the Transform Don't Trash NYC coalition has used these public reports to sum the total quantities of commercial trade waste disposed and recycled by facilities within DEC Region 2 to create a comparable year-to-year benchmark of disposal and recycling for the New York City commercial waste system.

To estimate the tonnages of commercial waste processed at putrescible waste transfer stations, we obtained the percentage of commercial waste processed at each transfer station from DSNY's quarterly transfer station reports, which break out commercial from DSNY waste at each permitted transfer station, and then multiplied the tons disposed and recovered by this percentage. We subtracted any quantities of waste transferred from one transfer station to another to avoid double-counting these tons.

Similarly, we summed the quantities of commercial waste recovered and disposed by Recyclables Handling and Recovery Facilities (RHRFs, also known as Materials Recovery Facilities) processing commercial recyclables in New York City, and ensured that quantities transferred between RHRFs or between RHRFs and transfer stations were not double-counted.

We excluded facilities that primarily process construction and demolition waste, and facilities that primarily or exclusively handle residential waste, such as DSNY-owned marine and rail transfer stations and the Sims Municipal Recycling MRF.

NYS DEC data do not include quantities of NYC commercial waste hauled directly to incinerators, landfills, and transfer facilities in New Jersey, Long Island, or out-of-city sites. Based on DSNY estimates of commercial waste generation in New York City, there may be as many as 500,000 additional tons of waste hauled to out-of-city locations each year.

## ABOUT US

This report and underlying research were produced by core members of the Transform Don't Trash NYC coalition, with Justin Wood of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest ([www.nylpi.org](http://www.nylpi.org)) as the lead author. Transform Don't Trash NYC is a growing coalition dedicated to transforming New York City's commercial trash industry to reduce waste and pollution, foster clean and healthy communities for all New Yorkers, and create good jobs.

## ENDNOTES

1. Construction and demolition recycling waste is largely handled at separately permitted facilities and recycling rates for this waste are calculated separately.
  2. The data we compiled from NYS DEC transfer station reports are corroborated by DSNY quarterly reports on transfer station tonnage. From 2015-2017, DSNY reports also show a 22% increase in putrescible commercial waste tonnage handled at NYC transfer stations.
  3. DSNY 2017 Annual Report: [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/downloads/pdf/about/in-side-dsny/2017\\_AnnualReport.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/downloads/pdf/about/in-side-dsny/2017_AnnualReport.pdf)
  4. Department of Sanitation: New York City Commercial Solid Waste Study and Analysis, 2012. [https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/docs/about\\_2012-commercial-waste-study\\_0815.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/docs/about_2012-commercial-waste-study_0815.pdf)
  5. Recology San Francisco Quarterly Rate Report for Year Ended June 30, 2017. Available at: <https://sfpublicworks.org/sites/default/files/Recology%20San%20Francisco%20Companies'%20Annual%20Report>
  6. Seattle Department of Public Works, Solid Waste Quarterly Report for Q4 2017. Available at: [http://www.seattle.gov/util/cs/groups/public/@spu/@garbage/documents/webcontent/1\\_071582.pdf](http://www.seattle.gov/util/cs/groups/public/@spu/@garbage/documents/webcontent/1_071582.pdf)
  7. The Tellus Institute, "More Jobs, Less Pollution," 2011. Available at: <http://www.tellus.org/tellus/publication/more-jobs-less-pollution-growing-the-recycling-economy-in-the-u-s>
- These findings are echoed in a new study of the central Florida recycling industries by the US Chamber of Commerce. Sara Zellner, PhD, "Beyond 34 Case Study: The Development of a Public-Private Recycling Partnership," June 2018. Available at: [https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/media-uploads/B34CaseStudy\\_Layout\\_June20.pdf](https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/media-uploads/B34CaseStudy_Layout_June20.pdf)
8. Transform Don't Trash NYC, "Clean City, Green Jobs," 2016. Available at: <http://transformdont-trashnyc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/TDTGreenJobsReport-final.pdf>
  9. Annual waste facility reports submitted to NYS DEC are available at: <ftp://ftp.dec.ny.gov/dshmf/SWME/>