Excellent work has been and is being done to create a sustainable City, and it is now possible for one of the foundation stones—community composting—to move fully into place. Community composting represents the best effort we can make in recovering organic resources, not only because it closes the loop tighter than centralized composting, but also because it can better engage the public in environmental stewardship.

Acknowledgement

This document reflects work that began at the NYC Community Compost Roundtable last summer, and matured through many subsequent meetings and conversations, in particular with those listed below. Many thanks to the following for their thoughtful comments and other contributions, provided in their individual capacities and not necessarily on behalf of their organizations:

Robin Barton (NYC Community Compost Roundtable), Charles Bayrer (Earth Matter), Tanya Bley (North Brooklyn Compost Project), Marisa Didominicus (Earth Matter), Hans Hesselein (Gowanus Canal Conservancy), David Hurd (GrowNYC), Claudia Joseph (Old Stone House), Laura Rosenshine (Community Compost NYC), Natasia Umi Sidarta (Gowanus Canal Conservancy), Sherry Showell (Park Slope Food Coop), Jason Smith (New York Restoration Project).

February, 2014 - David Buckel (content), Josh Treuhaft (design); Members, NYC Community Compost Roundtable
Introduction

This is a call to action for those who support a vision of helping New York City residents become environmental stewards.

Such a vision builds upon community-based composting as part of the foundation for recovering organic resources from our waste streams, because it is the most environmentally sustainable approach, best engages the public in stewardship, and strengthens our resiliency. Excellent work has been and is being done to create a sustainable City, and one of the foundation stones – community composting – can now move fully into place.

To claim truly the label of “sustainability,” it is necessary to factor in the hidden costs to the environment of large and highly centralized forms of resource recovery from waste streams. Community composting best reduces those hidden costs by keeping organics as close as possible to the source. That said, our City’s land usage was not designed for full sustainability, so while recovering organics through community composting is best, we need municipal and commercial recovery to manage the rest. But the challenge is to find the right balance – rather than the convenient one – between centralized and de-centralized systems. That means the City needs to expand community composting in a meaningful and substantial way, refusing to accept obstacles that can indeed be removed. This paper explains why and how.
Community Composting FAQ

What is community composting?

Urban community composting is a type of composting that is scaled to fit a community-based context like a neighborhood or college or place of work, and it recycles organic material as locally as possible with as much community participation and education as possible. It is a form of what’s known as decentralized composting, and contrasts to centralized composting that involves city-wide collection of residential or commercial organic material that is transported a distance. The first goal for community composting is that organic material flows the shortest possible distance in a cycle internal to a community, from the sources to a compost site and then, in a new form as mature compost, to greening projects in that same community. The second goal is to maximize participation of community members, both to help sustain the operation but also to foster individuals’ education about and commitment to sustainable practices. Obviously in large urban settings community composting cannot recover all organics, for which municipal and commercial partners are necessary, but good policy dictates that community-based sites should be developed to recover as much as is feasible.

What are the benefits of community composting over other forms of recovering organics from our waste stream?

Urban community composting best promotes long-term values of sustainability for many reasons:

- **Better for the environment** – reduces environmentally costly transport by greenhouse gas emitting trucks, because compostables can more easily be processed at or near the source, at the neighborhood level, see 2011 Master Plan For Resource Recovery in Austin, Texas ("... [D]ecentralized composting processes can reduce the carbon footprint of collection and transportation while consuming organics in more localized situations that do not require large organized collection programs) http://austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/Trash_and_Recycling/MasterPlan_Final_12.30.pdf;

- **Better supports the sustainable practice of local food growing** – increases community access to finished compost for growing food locally, for private, public, or institutional use (for example, urban farms in low-income neighborhoods, home or community food gardens, public school gardens, restaurants, food markets), and helps to shorten the distance between where some food is grown and where it is consumed;

- **Better supports other local greening projects and rehabilitation of urban soil** – increases community access to finished compost for local greening projects like street tree campaigns, household flower gardens, beautification/maintenance of parks/meridians, and more generally the construction of bioswales for improved stormwater management;
Best promotes public’s commitment to all forms of recycling through involvement in just one form of recycling – increases opportunities for the public to engage more meaningfully in sustainable recycling practices, because individuals can be involved more in processing compostables than in recovering other resources in the waste stream (glass/metal/paper/plastic), and they can more easily see the connection to growing their own food and beautifying their own streets/parks, all of which raises their environmental awareness about the importance of all efforts to reduce, re-use, and recycle, not just composting;

Improves compost – increases quality of compost because heightened levels of the education and environmental awareness inherent in community composting, with direct connections to the neighborhood’s improved food and beauty, thus leading individuals to sort their compostables with greater care and thus reduce the level of contaminants;

Best builds support for other significant composting programs like municipal residential and commercial pickup – the heightened commitment and awareness gets us closer to public readiness for the contaminant-free source separation needed for City-wide municipal residential and commercial pickup;

Strengthens our resiliency in the face of climate change – we build up our urban soil and improve stormwater management through community composting, at the same time that we improve our capacity to grow food locally;

Creates jobs – community compost operations without powered equipment depend heavily on human labor, and that creates potential for local jobs.

For all these reasons, the City should strive to realize the potential of community composting to the maximum extent, making serious efforts to identify at least several hundred additional community compost sites and provide appropriate support to launch programs. Once the appropriate scale is identified for recovery through community composting, then it will be easier to quantify what we have to manage otherwise through important partnerships with centralized municipal and commercial organics recovery.

But if community composting can’t manage all the organics in the City’s waste stream, why bother?

Recycling does not prevent all human harm to the environment, but we still do it because the planet is better off – as are we – for our having made the best efforts we can. Community composting represents the best effort we can make in recovering organic resources, not only because it closes the loop tighter than centralized composting, but also because it can better
engage the public in environmental stewardship. Such composting would be the only choice if the design of our cities allowed for it. But there are limits we must accept, especially relating to overbuilt land. Nonetheless, accepting limits does not mean choosing solely what is convenient over what is not, or big over small. It means we need to find an appropriate balance of approaches to resource recovery, giving extra weight to the most environmentally sustainable approaches while also accepting other approaches to meet the goal of maximum recovery. Decentralized community composting must work in tandem with municipal residential and commercial organics recovery – all are important components and the discussion needed is about appropriate scale for each.

New York City is poised like few other cities to find the right balance in favor of long-term values for sustainability. Elsewhere, municipal residential pickup has been adopted in the first instance as the predominant choice, often supplanting decentralized composting and impeding efforts better to reach long-term values for sustainable practices. New York City can benefit from its current position, where choices remain partly open and can be calibrated to ensure maximum support for decentralized composting. New York City can create a national model of sustainability for urban areas.

The exciting potential in New York City turns partly on the existing field of burgeoning neighborhood-based compost sites. Strong as the programs are, the challenges are to scale up by supporting high operational standards, remove unnecessary regulatory obstacles that thwart growth, and seek paths to financial sustainability with an appropriate level of independence from taxpayer money.

Why is community participation and education a necessary component of community composting?

Community composting offers an unusual opportunity in the recycling world for individuals to create something of value for their community with their own hands. After seeing up close how food and other organic discards turn into “black gold” for greening their streets, parks, school gardens and urban farms, many participants walk away thinking “how can we not be doing this as much as possible?” Thus many community composters believe their work is the gateway to the bigger realms of recycling and sustainability. That is how we grow the numbers of environmental stewards around the City. And at the micro level, picking through a mass of materials to extract inorganics – like twist ties and rubber bands and stickers – develops a culture of mindfulness regarding source separation for all forms of recycling, including municipal and commercial.

Many community composters believe their work is the gateway to the bigger realms of recycling and sustainability.
How big is too big in defining a community compost site?

For now, it may depend. Certainly a city-wide program is too big because by definition urban community composting is looking to close the loop as tightly as possible. But as mentioned above, our cities were not designed to make space for fully sustainable practices like community composting, which confronts many other obstacles on the path to success, including unhelpful regulatory agencies and a resistant public. That means we have to make all sorts of temporary adjustments along the path, like taking feedstock from neighboring communities and perhaps getting a bit larger than we would like if it preserves a key feedstock source. But as our models evolve, we need periodically to be reviewing our goals and asking the key questions:

- are we helping to make sure organic material flows the shortest possible distance in a cycle internal to a community, from the sources and then back to a community’s greening projects?
- are we maximizing participation of community members, both to help sustain the operation but also to foster individuals’ education about and commitment to sustainable practices?

What if the “community” is a restaurant or grocery store that separates out food waste and pays a hauler to take it to a commercial compost facility somewhere within the city limits?

Assuming responsible practices on everyone’s part, that approach could be the most sustainable option available. But it does not aspire to the goal of community composting, which is to recycle organics as near as possible and foster participation of community members in the greening of their community as part of a larger role of environmental stewardship. Many communities, not just residential neighborhoods but public schools and restaurants and grocery stores and companies in general are striving to achieve the goals of community composting.

What about anaerobic digestion?

Anaerobic digestion is typically a commercial venture, and does not produce compost, but instead a biogas and a solid byproduct called digestate. The biogas is sold. The digestate might serve as a feedstock for a community compost site, depending on a number of factors including the quality of that particular feedstock. An important issue is to clarify that there will be a sustainable use for such digestate, and ensure it does not get transported to landfills.
Next Steps

What are the next steps for community composting?

The City’s community composters are working hard to develop sites, recover increasing amounts of organics from the waste stream, and promote environmental stewardship. Many more stand ready to join, but the obstacles are challenging. Here are two of the top priorities that need to be addressed:

**Amend the Code that governs the NYC Business Integrity Commission to clarify that it must convert from an agency that stunts the growth of community composting to one that actively supports community composting.**

The Business Integrity Commission’s important function is to be "responsible for licensing, registration and regulation of businesses that remove, collect or dispose of trade waste and trade waste brokers." In carrying out its function, the Business Integrity Commission (“BIC”) has successfully combated "unscrupulous businesses in the industry." The City is far better off owing to BIC’s hard work.

But an unintended effect of BIC’s important work is the stunting of community composting. Prospective supporters and funders of community-based composting identify BIC as a reason not to support community based composting. There is a misperception that BIC would require a license for residential organic waste to be transported to a community composting program, reaching so far as to prevent a homeowner from walking kitchen veggie scraps down the street to a garden’s compost bin. In addition, small composting programs need material like coffee grounds and wood shavings for the best composting, and the best sources are commercial, but it’s believed that BIC would require a license for a neighborhood composter to swing by the local restaurant to pick up coffee grounds or swing by the local carpenter’s shop to pick a bag of wood shavings, or that BIC would otherwise bar those commercial sources from providing those materials. While small business community composters thrive in other cities like Philadelphia, in this City they die before they start, or operate under threat of a legal penalty. These and other perceptions stunt the growth of an important effort to reach our diversion goals for the waste stream and otherwise foster environmental stewardship in the City.

The stunting of community-based composting contradicts the law creating BIC. Under the City’s Administrative Code, Title 16 governs BIC’s important work, and it requires in part the "the recovery of materials from the New York city solid waste stream for the purpose of recycling such materials." Further, Title 16 requires that it be liberally construed to effectuate its goals. This means Title 16, to the extent consistent with a liberal construction to effectuate recycling goals, must be construed to support community-based composting.
Community composters have made efforts to correct problems, last year collaborating with the Manhattan Solid Waste Advisory Board (MSWAB) for support, and meeting with BIC and supplying them extensive background information. But there has been no change.

**Create a position for a community composting coordinator at an appropriate agency / non-profit with the task of helping community-based compost sites launch, meet high operational standards for producing quality compost and controlling odors/rodents, and engage the public to foster environmental stewardship.**

Much like small business needs support through NYC Small Business Services, community composting needs support. The City has a uniquely vibrant pool of dedicated environmentalists willing to advance the City’s goals for resiliency, diversion from landfills, and developing the public’s environmental stewardship. But that potential will dissipate in the absence of support. Lacking an infrastructure like Small Business Services, community composters confront numerous obstacles. They need operational advice and other support to achieve their goals of creating quality compost while controlling for odors/rodents and motivating public participation. They need help in managing a regulatory matrix that was created for large commercial operations who present far larger potential threats to the environment and who can pay for the support they need with regulations to succeed in making a profit.

The first step in solving the problem is to create a position for a city-wide community compost coordinator whose job is to share and help explain appropriate standards, plan site layout and operational protocols to meet those standards, assist with registration at the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and manage the challenges presented by the NYC Business Integrity Commission, and otherwise be available to assist in the effort to help achieve the City’s goals for environmental stewardship and diverting 75% of its waste from landfill. The coordinator position could be housed at an appropriate City agency or funded at a non-profit partner.
Conclusion

To build on and bolster all the excellent work done by so many advocates to build a sustainable City, one foundation stone now needs to move fully into place so we can have a solid basis for optimizing sustainability. We need the City’s most pertinent regulatory agency for composting, governed as it is by the recycling law in which we take great pride, to support rather than thwart community composting. Further, just as small business needs assistance to launch and thrive, community compost needs a city-wide coordinator to help reach best the goals to lower the City’s carbon footprint, increase local food growing, expand community greening projects, grow the public’s environmental stewardship, reduce contaminants in recovered resources, strengthen resiliency, and create jobs.

The City’s most pertinent regulatory agency for composting must support rather than thwart community composting.