New York City Independent Budget Office

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Environment

Curbside Composting: Current Trends in New York City's Organics Collection

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Executive Summary

The Department of Sanitation (DSNY) aims to divert material that can be composted, recycled, or repurposed from being thrown out as trash. Organic waste—food scraps, yard waste, and other compostable materials—make up roughly 36% of the City's residential waste stream, yet organics collections were 2.4% of residential waste collected in 2025. (All years refer to calendar years unless otherwise noted.) Diverting organic material creates compost or renewable natural gas, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and lowers waste sent to landfills.

From the 1990s through 2012, the City supported some organics programs, primarily including drop off sites and school composting. In 2013, DSNY started voluntary curbside organics collection, but the program faced budget cuts and frequent delays in expansion and service. In 2023, the City Council passed a local law requiring mandatory citywide organics collection by October 2024. The Adams administration rolled out citywide curbside pickup on time, with fine-based enforcement starting in April 2025. However, less than three weeks later, the Adams administration paused most enforcement through the end of 2025, ostensibly to allow DSNY additional time to conduct outreach and education.

The Mamdani administration resumed some level of fines in 2026, but it remains well below initial full enforcement levels. Between January and February 2026, DSNY issued fines for organic separation at just 3% of the level seen in April 2025. While DSNY projects annual increases in organics collections over the next ten years, the organics processing budget decreases after fiscal year 2026 from $24 million to a baseline of $19 million. Further, there has not been a major mayoral announcement to resume full enforcement and encourage compliance under the new administration.

Although still very low overall, organics collection levels in 2025 improved on past performance. In 2025, organics collections increased to 2.4% of residential waste, compared to 1.4% in 2024 (a 68% increase). Weekly tonnage rose sharply when enforcement began, nearly tripling in April 2025 alone. This momentum stalled when fine enforcement effectively paused—apart from the seasonal boost of fall yard waste, weekly organics collections declined 43% between the enforcement pause and the end of 2025. IBO's analysis shows that fine-based enforcement (or at least some form of financial incentive) is effective at encouraging compliance, and weakening these incentives leads to gradual declines in compliance. The future of the curbside organics program will depend on how the Mamdani administration approaches outreach, education, and enforcement.

Introduction

Organic waste—often called "organics" or "compost"—refers to biodegradable materials such as food scraps, yard trimmings, and some paper products. Depending on how it is sorted and processed, organic material can either become a source of pollution or a usable resource. Without effective composting programs, most organic waste ends up in trash bins. The New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) 2023 Waste Characterization Study estimated that for all forms of residential waste collected citywide, 36% of curbside collections is organic material.[1] (Years refer to calendar years unless otherwise noted.)

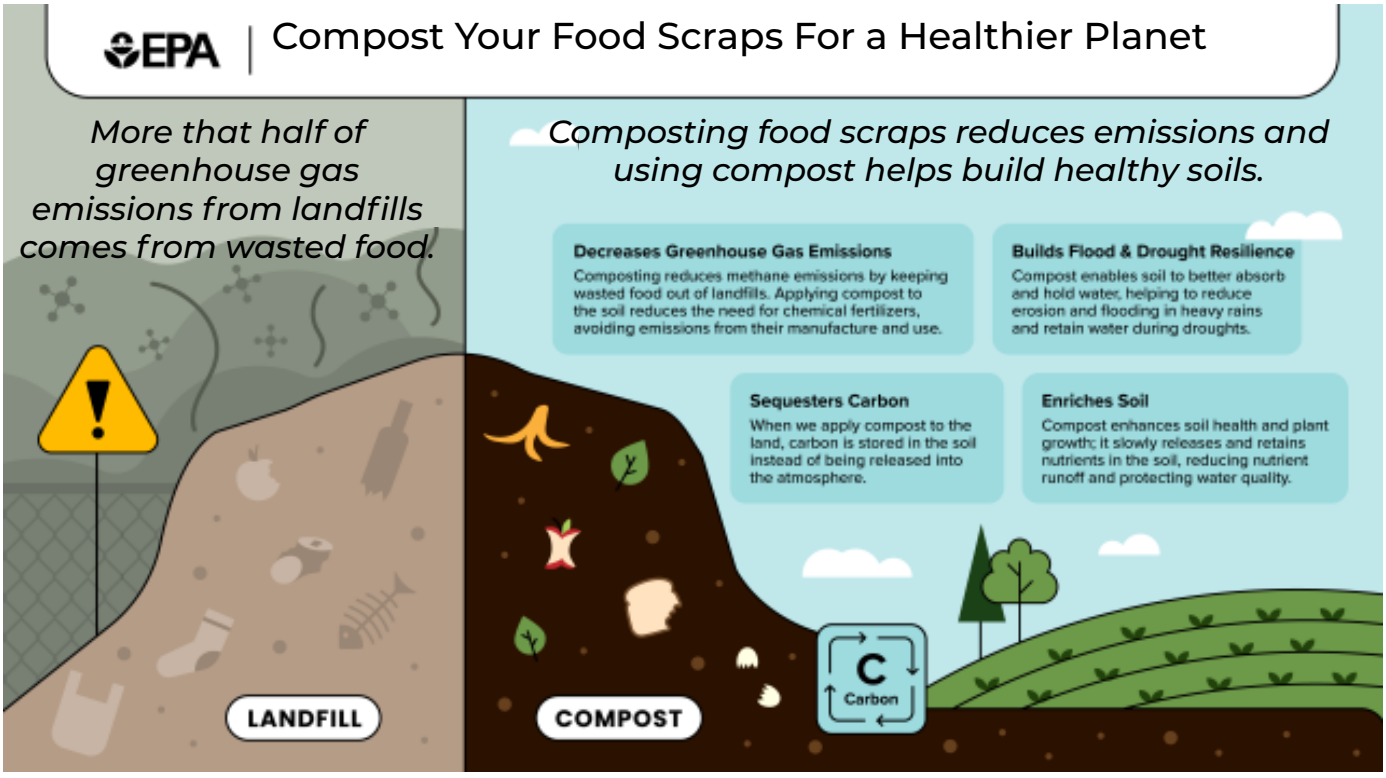
Organic waste collected and processed separately from trash has environmental benefits. It reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills and incinerators and lowers methane emissions, a potent greenhouse gas.[2] Organic waste can be turned into compost that improves the soil and helps retain water or processed into renewable natural gas that can be used for energy. These benefits align with the City's climate goal to reach carbon neutrality by 2050. In fiscal year 2024, waste—trash, recycling, and organics—accounted for 7.3% of New York City's total annual greenhouse gas emissions.[3] Figure 1 explains the environmental benefits of organics diversion.

Diverting organic waste from the trash stream also has fiscal implications, as hauling and

FIGURE 1

Benefits of Organics Diversion and Composting

Visit the EPA website for a clearer version of this graphic.



SOURCE: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Sustainable Management of Food Graphics

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exporting waste is expensive. DSNY sends most of its trash to disposal facilities in other states, a practice that has cost more than $500 million each year since fiscal year 2024. Organic waste can be processed much closer to where it was collected at facilities in Brooklyn, Staten Island, Long Island and New Jersey. Additionally, DSNY could see economies of scale for collections and waste export savings if substantial organic waste is diverted from the trash stream, a topic explored in a 2021 IBO report.

Composting programs also have community benefits, encouraging residents to reduce waste and take part in broader sustainability efforts. Processing waste closer to where it was collected reduces traffic, noise, and local air pollution, impacts that often affect lower-income and historically marginalized communities the most.[4] Compost created from organic waste can support local parks, gardens, and urban agriculture.

In this report, the Independent Budget Office (IBO) briefly reviews the history of New York City's organics program and discusses recent policy changes and trends impacting City organics collections. IBO uses DSNY data on curbside collections by truck route from City fiscal years 2013 to 2025 to contextualize the impact that policy changes under the Bloomberg, de Blasio, and Adams administrations had on the City's efforts to expand organics collection. The Mamdani administration is now tasked with addressing the requirements of the Zero Waste Act, passed by City Council in 2023—of which organics is a central component.

History of Organic Waste Collections in New York City

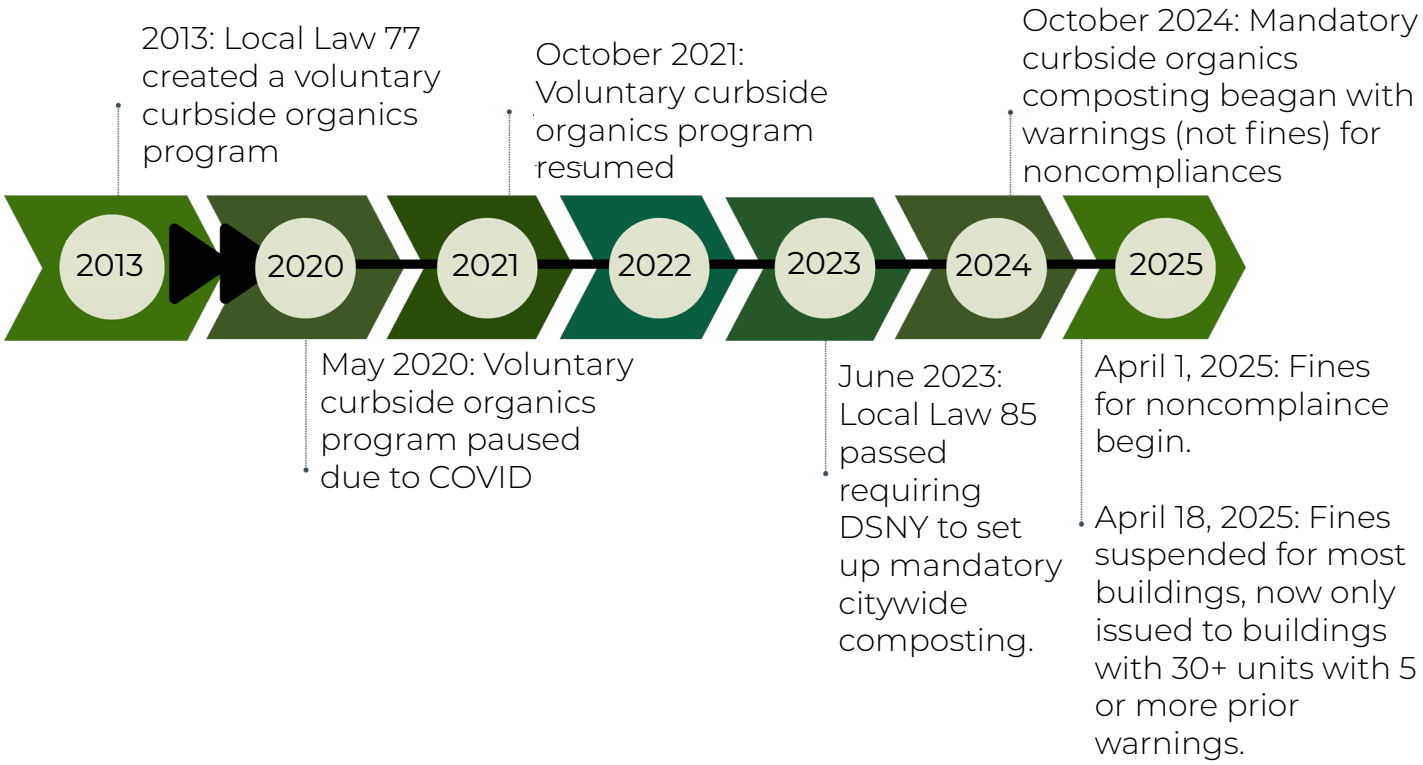
New York City's history with organics collection dates back nearly as far as its citywide recycling programs. In the 1990s, DSNY created the then New York City Compost Project and launched a fall leaf collection program.[5] However, organics collection is yet to achieve the same diversion rate—the proportion of organic material collected out of all residential waste—as the recycling program.[6] (Note "diversion rate" is not to be confused with "capture rate," which is the proportion of organic material collected out of all organic material in the waste stream.)

In 2011, the City funded drop-off sites for organics waste collection, where residents could voluntarily bring their food scraps, yard debris, and other biodegradable waste for composting. The City Council then passed Local Law 77 of 2013, directing DSNY to launch a voluntary curbside organics collection program, where building owners could opt-in to separate their organic waste into brown bins for DSNY trucks to pick up as part of its waste collection services. Curbside collection was only offered in certain neighborhoods, and brown bins were only automatically provided to buildings with fewer than 10 units; larger buildings could opt in. Enrollment in the voluntary program expanded gradually over time across all five boroughs until May 2020, when its $23 million budget was cut due to the pandemic. It resumed in October 2021.[7] The program diverted 1.4% of all collected waste to organics facilities in its best year (fiscal year 2024) and struggled to overcome high costs per unit. (See sidebar "Costs of Organics Collection".)

As part of the Zero Waste Act, the City Council passed Local Law 85 of 2023, which requires all residential property owners to separate food scraps, yard waste, and food-soiled paper for collection, thus establishing the largest mandatory composting program in the country. The

FIGURE 2

Timeline of Major Changes to New York City Curbside Organics Collections



SOURCE: IBO analysis of New York City Council local laws and DSNY data

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mandatory program was rolled out gradually, as shown in Figure 2.

Mandatory curbside composting began in October 2024, however DSNY issued warnings (but not fines) for six months to help property owners learn and comply. On April 1, 2025, the City began issuing fines for noncompliance; collections increased rapidly. However, less than three weeks later on April 18, the Adams administration suddenly paused most fines, and they have not been officially resumed in full to date.

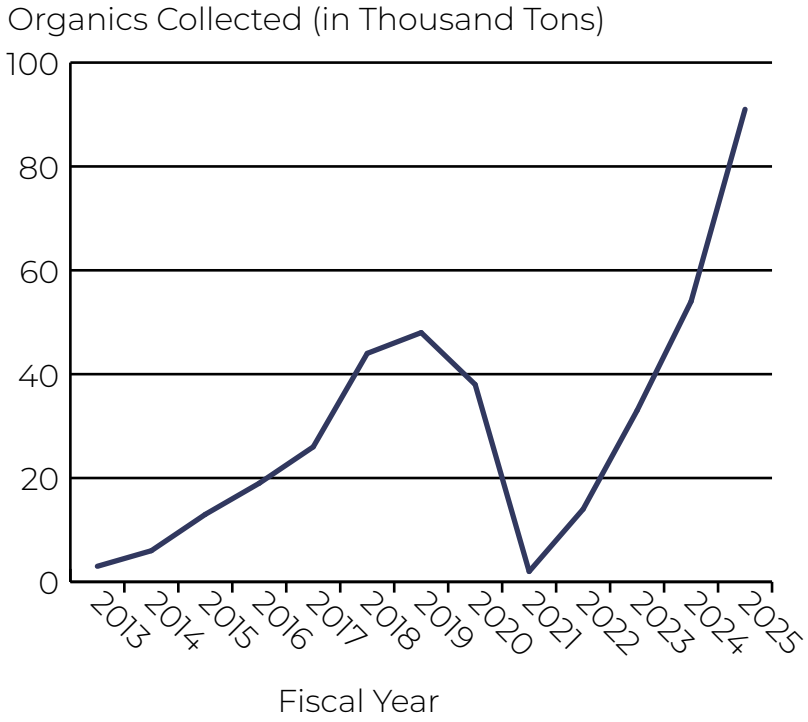
While the law remains in effect, enforcement was deferred, leaving many residents and property owners to treat organics sorting as optional. Inheriting the curbside collections program shaped by decisions made under the Bloomberg, de Blasio, and Adams administrations, the future trajectory of the citywide organics collection now rests with the Mamdani administration.[8]

Voluntary Curbside Organics Program

Figure 3 presents the annual organic waste collection since fiscal year 2013. Collections increased over time, in line with the start of the voluntary curbside collections program in 2013 and its gradual expansion. In 2013, DSNY collected 2,780 tons of organic material, growing to 47,931 tons by 2019.

FIGURE 3

DSNY Annual Organic Waste Collection



SOURCE: DSNY collections data

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There was a drop in collections at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when the voluntary curbside program was paused from May 2020 through October 2021. After the voluntary program resumed, collections recovered gradually during 2022 and 2023 and reached pre-pandemic levels in 2024. However, that only represented a 1.4% diversion rate for organics.

Mandatory Curbside Organics Program

Collections in 2025

When the mandatory curbside organics program began in October 2024, DSNY provided six months for properties to comply before enforcing the program through fines. During this period, DSNY frequently communicated to prepare building owners and residents for noncompliance fines, which started on April 1, 2025. DSNY conducted outreach via mailers, compost give-back events, and direct door-to-door canvassing of all residential properties with nine or fewer units, with additional information sessions in all community boards.[9]

On April 1, 2025, DSNY began actively enforcing the new fines, which match the fines for recycling violations. Failure to properly separate and set out compost and recycling will result in fines. Residential properties with:

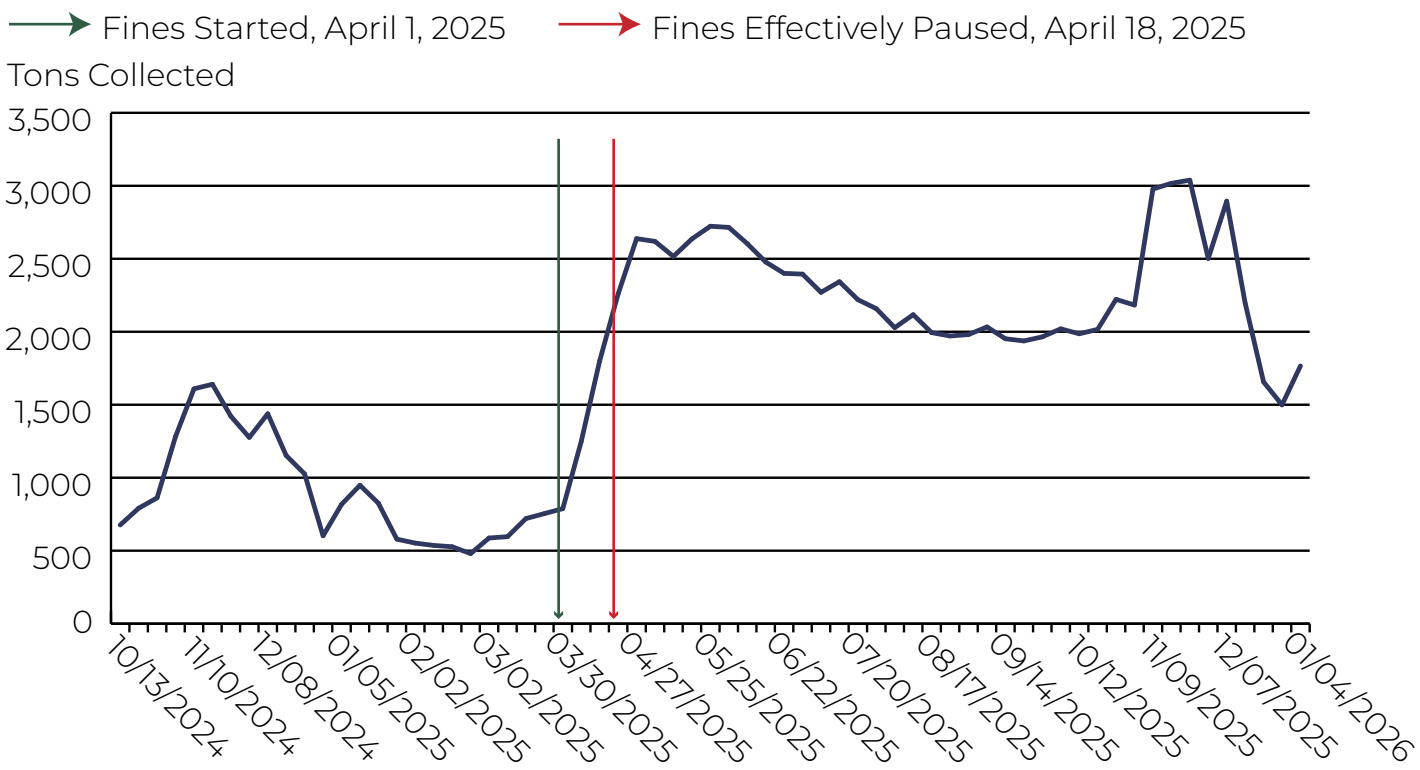
- One to eight units are charged $25 for first violation, $50 for the second, and $100 for the third and subsequent.
- Nine units or more are charged $100 for the first violation, $200 for the second, $300 for the third and subsequent.

In April 2025, DSNY issued 4,259 violations for noncompliance with mandatory organics rules, totaling $160,375 in fines issued, an average of $38 per violation.[10] In that same period, organics collections increased substantially.

Despite the preparation, notices, and increased collections, the Adams administration announced a suspension of fines for buildings with 30 or fewer units on April 18, less than

FIGURE 4

Weekly Organic Waste Collected



SOURCE: IBO analysis of DSNY Curbside Organics Tonnage data

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three weeks after starting enforcement. Buildings with more than 30 units would only receive fines after five warnings from DSNY; no other DSNY fines require a set number of warnings before being issued, effectively turning a mandatory program back into a voluntary one for most properties. For the remainder of calendar year 2025, DSNY issued no more than 40 violations per month. The Adams administration indicated that the "pause" would allow DSNY additional time to conduct outreach and education.[11]

Figure 4 presents weekly organics collections from October 2024 (the beginning of citywide mandatory curbside organics collection) to January 4, 2026, During this period:

- October 2024 - December 2024: Collections in the early months of the mandatory program saw a short-term peak in November 2024. Organic collections generally have a seasonal increase in late autumn because of fallen leaves and other yard debris. Other potential drivers include initial excitement about the mandatory program, and property owners wanting to meet compliance before they could be fined.
- January 2025 - March 2025: Collections dropped in early 2025, with DSNY collecting between 500 and 1,000 tons per week.

Costs of Organics Collection

Organic waste collection has historically been more expensive per unit than trash or recycling collections—largely driven by the high cost of staffing collections trucks relative to the tonnage collected on a route. IBO's 2021 organics report found that in 2019, the average cost of organics collection was $602 per ton. By comparison, the cost of trash collection was $86 per ton, and $167 per ton for recycling. (These 2019 values provide a baseline before both the Covid pandemic and the citywide mandatory organics program; IBO will consider updating the analysis when multiple years of data are available from the mandatory program.) Trucks collecting organics compared with recycling or trash have similar staffing and fuel costs, but organics trucks are collecting relatively few tons along their routes, when compared with trucks picking up trash or recycling.

Diverting organic matter from trash streams can reduce costs by increasing the efficiency of organics truck collections while reducing the volume of trash to be collected. IBO's report estimated that if New Yorkers were to divert 15% of all DSNY-collected waste to organics (on par with recycling diversion rates) and this came with economies of scale for processing collected material, the cost differential could be erased. Note that the costs cited in IBO's report are just financial costs, and do not value the environmental costs of the different waste streams.

- April 2025: When fine enforcement began on April 1, collections rose substantially. On April 18, enforcement was reduced, but collections continued climbing. In April, the rate of organics collection increased by 435 tons per week, representing a 192% increase over the four-week period. This collection spike suggests that reinstating full noncompliance penalties would likely boost collections substantially.[12]
- May 2025 – September 2025: Collections plateaued in May and then gradually declined from June through September. From the week of April 27 through September 21, weekly organics collection tonnage declined by 27%. This pattern suggests that reducing enforcement stalled the increases in collections and eventually led to a decrease. However, the fact that collections did not revert to pre-enforcement levels suggests that most properties continued composting once they had started the practice, even without fines.
- October 2025 – January 2026: Consistent with prior years, organics collection increased in autumn, largely due to the collection of leaves and fall foliage. DSNY broke weekly organics collection records in each of the first three weeks of November 2025. By December, weekly collections declined below September levels, marking a 43% decrease from May 2025.
- Overall, IBO found that in 2025, annual organics collections increased by 68% compared to 2024 levels (see Figure 3); however, that still only represents diversion of 2.4% of residential waste for organics, compared to a potential of 36%.

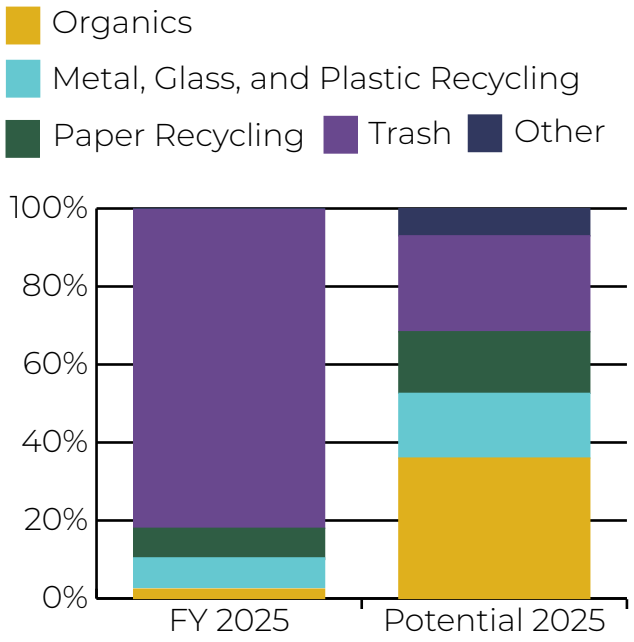
Recent Progress but a Long Way to Go

Despite growth in organics collection over time, the City is still far from diverting all organic waste. With less than three weeks of enforcement of mandatory organic waste separation in 2025, DSNY collected 90,000 tons of organics, accounting for 2.4% of the City's 3.7 million tons of total waste. DSNY's 2023 Waste Characterization Study estimated that organic material represented roughly 36% of the residential waste stream, or more than 1.3 million tons of organic material, highlighting substantial untapped potential (see Figure 5).

DSNY's waste stream goals are to divert material that could be composted, recycled, or repurposed from being thrown out as trash. Overall, DSNY estimated that existing programs could allow New Yorkers to divert up to 75% of their total waste through recycling, composting, or repurposing what would end up in a landfill, however total diversion is only at 17% as of 2025. There are opportunities to increase recycling diversion rates of metal, glass, plastic, paper, and other materials, but diverting organic waste from landfills presents the largest area for potential improvement.

FIGURE 5

2025 DSNY Residential Waste vs. Full Diversion Potential



SOURCES: DSNY trash collection run data and DSNY 2023 Waste Characterization report
NOTE: "Other" refers to other divertible material: textiles, E-waste, plastic shopping bags, and harmful household products.

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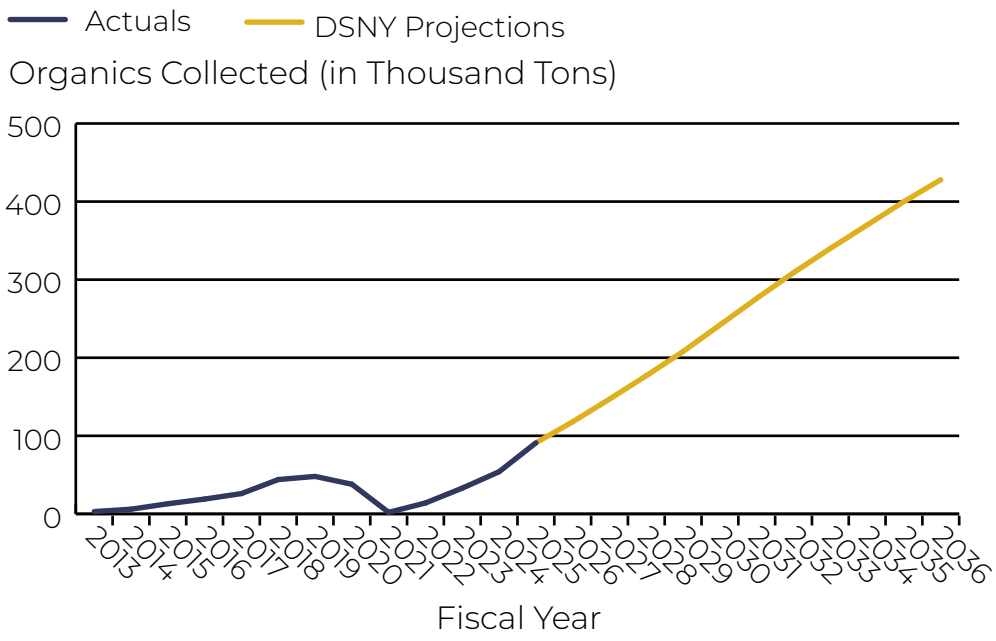
Organics Collections Looking Forward

DSNY Organics Forecasting

IBO's 2021 report found that achieving cost parity between organic waste collection and trash export requires organic processing costs of roughly $80 per ton and achieving diversion of 15% of total waste to the organics program.[13] In its Fiscal Year 2025 Zero Waste Report—published in October 2025, months after the enforcement was reduced—DSNY projected organics diversion rates through 2036 for the mandatory curbside program (see Figure 6). Based on these projections, IBO estimates that the City would capture approximately 32% of compostable material in its organics waste stream by 2036. Assuming total waste collected remains at 2025 levels (3.72 million tons), this would equate to just 11.5% diversion of all residential waste—below the 15% organics diversion benchmark IBO identified as necessary for cost parity with trash export.[14]

FIGURE 6

DSNY Organics Collection Projections Through 2036



SOURCES: DSNY trash collection run data and DSNY 2026 Zero-Waste report
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Potential Benefits of Resuming Full Enforcement

DSNY's projections in Figure 6 appear to be roughly linear in relation to actual collections from 2021 through 2025. Per DSNY, New York City residential curbside recycling and other organics municipal programs, such as Cambridge, MA, and the state of Vermont, informed their assumptions for organics collection projections. These three programs all had little to no enforcement in their early years; this suggests that DSNY's model assumes minimal enforcement.[15] The sharp rise in collections witnessed in April 2025 (refer to Figure 4) suggests that collections may accelerate faster than DSNY projections if full enforcement is resumed.

Under the Mamdani administration, DSNY issued 415 organic waste fines in January and February 2026, signaling at least a partial resumption of fines. However, this is still notably less than the 4,259 issued in the three weeks of full enforcement in April 2025. DSNY issued 237 fines per day on average in April 2025 compared to only 7 fines per day in January and February 2026. That equates to 3% of the level of violations issued during the April enforcement period of the Adams administration. While the DSNY chair commented that enforcement has resumed during the March 16, 2026 preliminary budget hearing, these low levels of violations issued suggest only partial reinforcement was resumed. There has also not been a major announcement of resumed enforcement, which could serve as a public signal that encourages property owners to comply. Additionally, while DSNY projects annual increases in organics collections over the next ten years, the organics processing budget decreases from $24 million in fiscal year 2026 down to $19 million each year from 2027 through 2030.

Long-term, higher organics collection rates could save the City money by reducing trash export costs driven by contracts for long-haul transport and disposal outside of the City. While the City still incurs shipping and processing costs for organics recycling, this would be offset by savings from less demand for long-distance export transport and tipping fees, the cost per ton of waste processing facilities. New York City has numerous out-of-state landfill contracts for its two

Brooklyn Marine Transfer Stations. Waste is moved by barge and then rail to landfills ranging from upstate New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania to as far away as Virginia and South Carolina. A 2023 report by the Environmental Research and Education Foundation showed that landfill tipping fees have increased the most and are the highest in the northeast United States.

Alternative Approach: San Francisco's Organics Program

While IBO's analysis suggests that resuming fines is likely an effective way to encourage organics diversion, San Francisco's model may provide an alternative approach, as they have one of the most successful municipal organics programs in the country. San Francisco's Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance, passed in 2009, required all residents and businesses to separate compostable material. To educate residents, Recology, the city's sole waste collection company, left explanatory tags on bins with misplaced items in the early days of the program to educate residents.

San Francisco residents are charged directly for waste collection, whereas New York City funds residential waste through the City's general fund. When mandatory organics sorting began, San Francisco garbage rates were based on the size of the landfill bin, while recycling and composting bins had no extra cost. Therefore, the more residents composted and recycled, the smaller their landfill bin needed to be, lowering their monthly bill. San Francisco's Department of the Environment stated in 2015 that, although organics non-compliance cases existed, no fines had been issued to residents five years into the program. San Francisco's trash structure made it cheaper for residents to comply than to violate the rules.

Though San Francisco remains far ahead of New York City in its zero-waste efforts, it has encountered its own challenges. In 2021, San Francisco's combined waste diversion rate (the share of organics and recycling kept out of the trash) was approximately 50%, having declined from about 62% in 2014.[16] (San Francisco's diversion rate includes commercial waste and is calculated somewhat differently from New York City's, making rate comparisons across cities difficult.) San Francisco's drop in diversion rate correlates to when San Francisco weakened its financial incentives for organics separation. In 2013, after a request from Recology citing low revenues, collection fees were introduced for recycling and organics, ending the earlier incentive of free composting. While San Francisco's fee structure is still intended to promote sorting behavior, it's unclear how much it influences residents and businesses today, especially since bin charges are based on size, not usage or weight.

As of 2026, San Francisco is facing high organic waste contamination rates which continue to lower the city's diversion rate. Recology is combatting contamination with fines and removal of diversion discounts on individual accounts. Residential buildings receive a warning on their first violation, but fines are issued beginning at the second violation.[17]

If New York City were interested in creating an incentive structure similar to San Francisco's original system, one option could include instituting a "pay-as-you-throw" program where residential properties are charged based on the amount of refuse they throw away, as described in IBO's What If? from February 2024. If refuse had a direct cost while recycling and organics were free to residents, it might incentivize better diversion rates. An important note

FIGURE 7

Comparison of Mandatory Composting Programs in New York City and San Francisco

	New York City	San Francisco
First year of Mandatory Curbside Composting	2024	2009
Property Types in Program	Primarily residential	Residential and commercial
Residential Enforcement Mechanism	1-8 Units: Fines with increasing rates ($25 for first offense, $50 for second, $100 for third) 9+ Units: Fines with increasing rates ($100 for first offense, $200 for second, $300 for third)	Contamination warnings, fines, and loss of discount (if applicable)
Who Collects Curbside Organics?	City agency (DSNY)	Private contractor (Recology)

SOURCES: DSNY; NYU Guarini Center; Recology

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is that San Francisco has historically branded itself as an environmentally conscious city, with a long-rooted culture of waste sorting. Their pilot voluntary organics program began in 1996 and is recognized as the first large-scale municipal composting program in the U.S.[18] Figure 7 compares New York City's organics program with that of San Francisco.

Conclusion

New York City is entering a significant new phase in its approach to organics collection. With over a decade of starts and stalls to organics collection program funding, the City's organics diversion rate under the voluntary program remained low, at 1.4% in 2024, even though compostable materials account for more than a third of the City's waste stream. With the implementation of the City's new mandatory composting law and the launch of the largest organics collection program in the country, the Mamdani administration now has the potential to turn one of its most underperforming waste streams into a cornerstone of its sustainability efforts. Increasing organics collection is one strategy to help New York City reach its Zero Waste goals. By diverting food scraps and yard waste, the City can significantly reduce landfill use, cut greenhouse gas emissions, improve urban soil and green spaces, reduce pests, and create healthier neighborhoods for residents.

With the citywide mandatory program operating for most of fiscal year 2025, DSNY increased previous organics tonnage by 68% and raised the diversion rate to 2.4% in the first year. The sharpest collection rise occurred under full enforcement, nearly tripling tonnage in April 2025 alone. This was followed by a steady decline in weekly organics collected after reducing enforcement, with 43% less organics tonnage collected from May through December 2025. Collection spikes in April 2025 suggest that reinstating full noncompliance penalties would

likely boost collections substantially. Declines in weekly organics collection after reducing enforcement demonstrated that penalties were an effective method to maintain progress and help achieve economies of scale for both organics collection and processing.

San Francisco's more established organics collection demonstrates an alternative method to encourage compliance without relying on punitive measures, but notably still uses financial incentives. When San Francisco reduced its financial incentives, its progress then started to slip further away from its zero-waste goals, a lesson for New York City that some form of finance-based incentive is effective at encouraging compliance, and weakening the incentive often leads to lower diversion rates. Under the Mamdani administration, key decisions on enforcement and outreach remain open questions and will be central to the future trajectory of the City's ability to achieve its zero waste goals.

Endnotes

1 There are some non-residential properties where DSNY collects waste.

2 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. (2025). Composting

3 IBO used the emissions as defined under the State's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act (CLCPA), as opposed to those of the Global Protocol for Cities, because CLCPA highlights the near-term warming caused by methane emissions. New York City Mayor's Office of Climate & Environmental Justice. NYC Greenhouse Gas Inventories.

4 In reference to organics diversion reducing traffic, noise, and air pollution, see: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2023). Best Practices for Solid Waste Management – Equity in Solid Waste Management. In reference to disproportionate impacts on disadvantaged communities, see: New York City Comptroller (2023). Fair Share? Siting New York City's Municipal Facilities

5 Wayback Machine (2001). Composting in New York City: A Complete Program History (p. 10).

6 About 15.6% of residential waste collected in 2025 was recycled, compared to 2.4% in organics bins. While both recycling and organics diversion could increase, recyclable materials constitute about 32% of all residential waste, while organics constitute 36%, suggesting recycling programs have been more successful to date.

7 New York City Department of Sanitation. (2022). Solid Waste Management Plan: Biennial update 2021-2022. City of New York. (pg. 12).

8 Quigley, Liam. 2026. Gothamist. Mayor Mamdani resumes fines for failure to compost in NYC.

9 New York City Department of Sanitation. (2023). Organics implementation plan.

10 The new violation codes were: ARI7 – Failure to recycle yard waste (1–8 dwelling units), ARJ1 – Failure to recycle yard waste (9+ dwelling units), ARL4 – Failure to recycle organic waste (1–8 dwelling units), ARL7 – Failure to recycle organic waste (9+ dwelling units)

11 Maldonado, Samantha. (2025, April 18.) Sanitation Pauses Fines for Failing to Compost. The City.

12 IBO reviewed seasonal patterns in organics collections for prior years and noted a small seasonal increase in the last few Aprils; per DSNY this typically relates to spring cleanups generating substantial leaf and yard waste. However, IBO sees this seasonal increase as negligible; given the scale of the increase during April 2025, the data suggest that the spike was caused by enforcement.

13 While these figures use 2019 data, IBO believes it is premature to update them to reflect the mandatory curbside organics programs, and that IBO's prior analysis still provides a rough estimate of the cost per ton and organics diversion rate for cost parity with other waste streams.

14 Except for a modest uptick in trash in 2021 and 2022, reflecting changes to remote work and shelter-in-place instructions during the pandemic, leading to more residential-based trash, New York City's total volume of waste has remained consistent over the past 15 years.

15 New York City's mandatory recycling program (created by Local Law 19 of 1989) focused on education and outreach in its initial years. Cambridge, MA's curbside organics collection program has no enforcement mechanism. Vermont's statewide mandatory composting program announcement materials stated "education and outreach are the initial methods of implementation."

16 Recology uses a singular diversion rate for commercial and residential properties in San Francisco, but as noted by the NYU Guarini Center, the City of San Francisco has cited that residencies and small businesses have a slightly higher than 50% diversion rate compared to large commercial businesses (See also footnote 18). Song, S., Civello, M. M., & Silbermann, S. (2022). Breaking down urban organics: Lessons from San Francisco's organics program and implications for New York City (Policy Brief). Guarini Center on Environmental, Energy and Land Use Law, NYU School of Law.

17 Contamination Charges and Removal of Diversion Discounts Protocol. 2026. Recology.

18 NRDC. 2017. San Francisco Composting from fork to farm and back.

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IBO's mission is to enhance understanding of New York City's budget, public policy, and economy through independent analysis.

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