

COVID IMPACTS ON WASTE



Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member

Prior to COVID-19, New York City looked to be on the brink of a dramatic waste shift. Innovative waste-mitigation legislation instituting Commercial Waste Zones and a Plastic Bag Ban would soon take effect and envelope-pushing policies — Clean Streets and Mandatory Composting — were being introduced. Even the general public seemed on the verge of a zero waste tipping point, with behaviors like bringing refillable mugs to coffee shops gaining traction.

COVID-19 halted nearly all of it.

In this section, we explore how the pandemic changed our City and borough, affecting issues ranging from waste policy to community activism. We also honor the countless individuals and organizations that worked hard, despite a devastating pandemic, to foster a more sustainable borough.

Waste Policy

The pandemic catalyzed changes to the City’s waste policies, delaying by months legislation that had been poised to go into effect.

New York State Bag Waste Reduction Law

(Environmental Conservation Law ECL Article 27, Title 28) aimed to reduce New Yorkers’ reliance on plastic bags — 23 billion per year. The ban required patrons to bring their own bags to stores or pay a five-cent fee for paper bags (with some exceptions and exemptions); shops found breaking the law could be fined \$500. COVID-19 and a lawsuit brought by plastic bag manufacturers delayed implementation, scheduled for March 1, 2020. The Bodega and Small Business

Association also sued, and with courts short-staffed due to the pandemic, enforcement was pushed back again. The New York State Supreme Court ultimately struck down the lawsuit. Enforcement began in mid-October 2020, seven months later than expected.¹

Commercial Waste Zones (Local law LL199 of 2019)

Passed in November 2019, CWZs were a first step toward overhauling New York City’s commercial waste collection system. The seeks to increase safety and efficiency, while aligning private hauling with the City’s Green New Deal and zero waste goals.² Due to COVID-19 changes in commercial waste tonnage and uncertainty about DSNY’s FY21 budget, the release of Requests for Proposals for bidders to service zones was postponed from late Spring 2020 to December.³ In mid-March 2021, after a public comment period, DSNY finally published proposed rules regarding public safety requirements. The Business Integrity Commission, which licenses private carters, released its proposed rules and safety requirements in parallel.⁴

As late as March 12, 2020, New York City Council Speaker Corey Johnson proposed making Curbside Organics Collection available to all New Yorkers and eventually mandatory to reduce waste and stimulate a circular economy.⁵ His Expanded Curbside Organics Collection proposal included opportunities for textile recycling, putting construction and demolition material to good use, and using a trash wheel to clean waterways, as well. After COVID-19, his proposal was sidelined and he has been silent ever since about his interest in reviving the plan.⁶ *Despite this setback, a local law (L.L. Int. 1162-2013) requiring 8,500 additional food-related businesses to separate Organics went into effect on July 31, 2020.*

NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY)

With nearly all commercial businesses closed or operating at reduced capacity, and with much of New York City’s workforce at home, COVID-19 saw a significant increase in DSNY’s 2020 residential waste burden. **In CY20, Queens’ residential Refuse rate rose by 9.4%, Paper collections by 5.7%, and MGPC by 21.1%.** The May 2020 suspension of Curbside Organics Collection further contributed to an increase in Municipal Solid Waste, as people once again mixed Organics with Refuse. Fall Curbside Leaf Collection took place as normal in October 2020, but was cut in November and December. Instead, residents were urged to compost leaves at home or take them to a community leaf drop-off.⁸

	Refuse	Paper	MGPC	Res Organics	Leaves	Xmas Trees
2019	699596.6	77903.7	89279.1	14278.9	813.6	381.3
2020	765563.7	82316.6	108114.2	3811.9	12	509.9
Difference	+65967.1	+4412.9	+18835.1	-10467	-801.6	+128.6
% Change	+9.43%	+5.66%	+21.10%	-73.30%	-98.53%	+33.73%

Comparing Queens’ Residential Collections in Tons: CY 2019 to 2020
Source: : NYC Open Data, DSNY Monthly Tonnage



Recyclables Ready for Pickup
Source: QSWAB Organizing Committee Member

Staffing

Lauded as essential before the pandemic, DSNY workers faced greater challenges once COVID emerged. As early as March 27, 2020, 61 positive COVID cases were reported among DSNY staff and 20 garages were closed temporarily.⁹ As the situation intensified, DSNY made plans to keep staff safe by regularly cleaning surfaces, distributing PPE, limiting the number of staff in a garage at the same time, and starting shifts at 5 a.m. to reduce public contact.¹⁰ **In July 2020, the agency slashed its FY21 operating budget by \$106M, which led to the loss of 400 positions Citywide,¹¹ among them Job Training Participant (JTP) and Alternate Sentence Workers (ASW), resulting in 285 fewer in Queens each week.** By September, DSNY Commissioner Garcia had resigned, calling agency cuts “unconscionable” and remarking that NYC’s Zero Waste by 2030 goal was “slipping away from us very quickly.” Shortly thereafter, Mayor DeBlasio appointed Ridgewood’s Edward Grayson to take the helm of the agency, first as Acting Commissioner and then, on December 31, 2020, as the newly appointed DSNY Commissioner.¹²

[On March 3, 2021, the online paper The City reported that a total of 1,800 DSNY sanitation workers had contracted the virus and eight had died.]¹³

Street Cleaning

As part of operating budget cuts, DSNY’s public litter basket collection budget was slashed by 63% (49% in Queens), limiting collection to weekdays and holidays and halting Sunday collections entirely.¹⁴ Complaints of missed trash pick-ups escalated, confirmed by a September 2020 audit by NYS Comptroller DiNapoli highlighting poor conditions

on City streets and sidewalks. That same month, Mayor DeBlasio committed to increasing litter basket trucks by 24% and restarting the CleaNYC initiative, while Governor Cuomo threatened to send in the National Guard to address the City’s waste woes.¹⁵ Increased litter basket service and CleaNYC sidewalk and street sweeping was finally restored to 20+ neighborhoods Citywide most impacted by COVID, among them Corona.¹⁶ Additional cuts to cleaning initiatives and services included eliminating the Syringe Litter Patrol unit, reassigning five personnel from DSNY’s Illegal Dumping Task Force, reducing by 30% vacant lot cleaning, and eliminating the highway ramp sweeping detail.¹⁷

Programs and Services

In March 2020, the City canceled SAFE (Solvents, Automotive, Flammables, and Electronics) collection events and halted curbside electronics recycling and textile pick-ups. **By May, DSNY announced Curbside Organics Collection and SAFE events would be suspended through June 30, 2021.** Residents were instructed to throw Organics with Refuse and told to keep E-Waste or discard items using private means; the [NYS Electronic Equipment Recycling and Reuse Act](#) makes it illegal to discard electronics along with trash due to the presence of heavy metals and chemicals.¹⁹

Some programs returned. By the end of 2020, ecycleNYC was restored, with pick-up appointments available for buildings already enrolled and applications available for new building sign-ups.²⁰ reFashionNYC was also revived.²¹

On March 30, 2021, Mayor DeBlasio unveiled three initiatives to restore lost services: increased dedicated litter basket service (more than 100 trucks per week) and restored funding for Sunday service; a new Precision Cleaning Initiative involving borough-based teams conducting targeted cleaning of litter conditions, illegal dumping, and overflowing litter baskets; and a re-designed Community Clean-up Van in partnership with the Sanitation Foundation and NYC Service to provide additional tools and resources for community groups and to support neighborhood cleanups during a Citywide Spring Cleanup effort.¹⁸

On April 22, 2021 (Earth Day), Mayor Bill DeBlasio announced that Curbside Organics Collection would resume starting in October 2021 for neighborhoods previously enrolled in the program with households and buildings signing-up for the “opt-in” program beginning in August.

In addition to Curbside Organics Collection, a plan is also in place to double neighborhood FSDOs and return Organics Collection to ~1000 schools Citywide.

Special Waste drop-off sites are slated to reopen in July 2021 and SAFE events will resume in fall.

Many activists and advocates in the SaveOurCompost Coalition remain skeptical about the success of Curbside Organics Collection restarting without more community input and a plan to ensure the hard work residents do to divert organic materials will be matched by compost processing capacity.⁷⁵

DSNY Partnerships

After halting Curbside Organics Collection starting May 4, 2020,²² plans were in place to eliminate an additional \$3.5M from the NYC Compost Project and \$2.9M from GrowNYC’s Zero Waste programs as a part of drastic cuts to DSNY’s FY21 budget. After community pressure, \$2.9M was restored at the last minute to the NYC Compost Project.²³ **Starting in September 2020 food scrap drop-offs and compost processing restarted, albeit at a lower capacity, with Curbside Organics Collection still on-hold into 2021.**

After partial restoration of funds, **Big Reuse** restarted compost collections at four Queens locations, (Astoria Pug hosting three sites, and Socrates Sculpture Park hosting the fourth) and provided technical assistance, browns, and pick-up services to Queens FSDO sites that were at overflow.²⁴ As of April 2021, Big Reuse remains in danger of losing its compost processing site on NYC Parks’ land due to agency claims that large-scale composting on City-owned land is impermissible. Big Reuse and its supporters strongly dispute that contention.²⁵

In December 2020, **Queens Botanical Garden** restarted processing material at four locations (Queens Botanical Garden, The Compost Collective, Kehilat Sephardim Synagogue, and Garden of Resilience) and offering technical assistance, distributing browns, and hosting

volunteer events.²⁶ QBG has since worked to expand FSDOs in Central and Eastern Queens while providing technical assistance to those in Western Queens. Nonetheless, QBG has struggled to have its NYCCP collections return to pre-pandemic levels. Their Farm Site was eliminated in the City’s FY21 budget, while compost program full-time staff downsized from five to two. Budget cuts suspended QBG’s Master Composter course, distribution of reduced-priced compost bins, and educational workshops. All the while, Queens residents continued requesting compost classes, materials, and toolkits, especially as they were spending more time at home.²⁷

Cuts to **GrowNYC’s** budget forced layoffs of over 80 full- and part-time staff.²⁸ According to GrowNYC’s website, the loss encompassed “all of GrowNYC’s zero waste programs, including Zero Waste Schools, composting, Stop ‘N’ Swap,[®] and general recycling outreach & education.”²⁹ In September 2020, the partial restoration of compost funding allowed for an early October re-opening of the Jackson Heights Greenmarket FSDO in partnership with hauler and processor QBG. Currently fewer than half of GrowNYC’s drop-off sites Citywide are open, with Jackson Heights Greenmarket the only one of 10 open in Queens.³⁰



Jackson Heights Food Scrap Drop-Off, March 2021
Source: QSWAB Organizing Committee Member

City Agencies

NYC Department of Education (DOE)

Dramatic cuts to DOE’s waste initiatives caused the suspension of DSNY Organic Collections from November 2020 until the end of the 2020-2021 school year; the agency encouraged schools to create composting opportunities in school yards as an alternative.³¹ Also cut in the FY21 budget was support for the Zero Waste Pledge program.³² **Despite this, five Queens schools that took the Zero Waste Pledge in 2019 and nine of 12 schools participating in Race Against Waste continued into 2020 without full funding.**³³

	School Organics
2019	1,762.20
2020	777.6
Change in Tons	-984.6
% Change	-55.87%

Change in Organics Collection at Queens Public Schools: CY 2019 to 2020
Source: NYC Open Data, DSNY Monthly Tonnage Data

NYC Parks

COVID-19’s forced isolation spurred many to seek refuge in local parks. Yet even as demand increased, **NYC Parks saw an over \$84M reduction in its FY20-21 operating budget, one-seventh of its usual funding.**³⁴ Maintenance and seasonal staff lost jobs (1,700),³⁵ and by the end of August, complaints about trash rose 120% with 517 in Queens alone.³⁶ In response, NYC Parks created over 100 new and highly visible trash corrals at picnic areas in their most crowded parks and encouraged local groups to organize volunteer cleanups with support from electeds and Partnerships for Parks.³⁷ NYC Parks also launched a “Toss Your Trash” campaign featuring signage and public service announcements in prominent locations urging New Yorkers to take responsibility for their garbage. Christmas tree collections and NYC Parks’ Mulchfest events continued as normal to divert organic materials.



Source: NYC Parks



“Carry in, Carry out” sign with overflowing waste basket in Astoria Park, August 2020
Source: QSWAB Organizing Committee Member

New York City Council & Electeds

In April 2020, Mayor DeBlasio released his proposed FY21 budget, which included the aforementioned \$3.5M cut linked to temporary suspension of community composting. Brooklyn/Queens CM Reynoso, Chair of the NYCC Sanitation Committee, supported by CMs (including Queens’ Van Bramer)³⁸ and hundreds of grassroots advocates, fought to preserve the funds through testimony and town halls. **In the end, the approved FY2021 budget reinstated \$2.9M,³⁹ allowing some NYCCP and GrowNYC staff to be rehired and some FSDO and compost processing sites reopened.**

CM Reynoso and Manhattan CM Keith Powers also joined forces to propose what they titled the **Community Organics and Recycling Empowerment (CORE) Act**, two bills that would preserve or create 177 drop-off sites Citywide for organic and inorganic material — three per Community District — by June 2021. Several Queens CMs co-sponsored the bill, and it gained support from a grassroots coalition organized under the name **#SaveOurCompost**.⁴¹ But as of April 2021, the CORE Act remains stalled due to the Administration’s budget concerns.

Electeds also helped with volunteer efforts, with some hosting neighborhood events. In summer 2020, CM Adams worked with South Queens Women’s March, South East Queens Cleanup Initiative (SEQCLEANUP), Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., and Hood Love to clean up trash in Ozone Park, Richmond Hill, and Jamaica.⁴² In August, New York State Senator Joseph Addabbo coordinated with a DSNY garage to remove bags of garbage collected by Howard Beach residents that had accumulated for over a month. CM Moya led a November cleanup in Corona.⁴³ And in November, Senator Addabbo, along with Assembly member Miller and CM Holden, hosted an E-Waste collection event in Forest Park with the Lower East Side Ecology Center that over 400 community members attended.⁴⁴

Nonprofits

The pandemic created budget shortfalls and operational challenges for waste-focused nonprofits, too.

Food-rescue nonprofit **Rescuing Leftover Cuisine** noted in an Instagram Live conversation with **ThinkZero LLC** that they were initially deluged with requests from partner restaurants and establishments to rescue and donate food. However, once some of these establishments closed, RLC had to pivot to engage “larger grocery stores and food manufacturers” to find food for those in need. Despite this, RLC was able to rescue and donate more than 1.6M lbs. of food in 2020, more than in any previous year.⁴⁵

City Harvest, New York’s largest food rescue organization, reported a similar influx of donations at the start of the pandemic. But by mid-April, many community recipient partners had shuttered due to health, safety, and logistical issues. The nonprofit shifted to work with local organizations to open Emergency Food Distribution Sites in hard-hit neighborhoods (30 in all) and kept mobile markets (including two in western Queens) active by following health and safety guidelines and distributing masks and gloves so organizations could operate safely. In August 2020, the organization reported having “rescued and delivered 56M pounds of food during the pandemic, a 79% increase over the same period [in 2019].”⁴⁶

Community Groups

CleanUp Initiatives

DSNY supports a range of volunteer-led programs such as **Community Cleanup Tool Loan** and **“Adopt-a-Basket” Programs** that anyone wanting to give back to their neighborhoods can freely access.⁴⁷ Due to reductions in litter basket collections and street cleaning linked to COVID-19 budget cuts, Queens residents used these programs to lead 33 cleanups in 2020, nearly double (19) the number they had in 2019.⁴⁸

Community groups also helped clean NYC Parks during events like **Partnerships for Parks’ It’s My Park Day**. In 2020, nine Queens NYC Parks “friends-of” groups

participated in IMPD cleanup and beautification activities, among them Friends of Alley Pond Park (Oakland Gardens), Crocheron Park and John Golden Park (Bayside); Herman A. McNeil Park (College Point); and Juniper Valley Park (Middle Village).⁴⁹

New neighborhood groups also formed to address the increase in street litter.

Abuela Neighborhood Maintenance (Southeast Queens) started an art and cleanup project connecting neighbors around the common goal of maintaining communities, litter-free. Through text, crafts, photography, and design, the group brought attention to their volunteer effort and inspired on-lookers to join. Angela Miskis, who founded the group in April 2020, reported that by March 2021 they had collected over 1,200 lbs. of trash and organized four cleanups that drew an average of 15 volunteers per event.⁵⁰

Proud Astorian (Astoria) started in June 2020 after Kate Peterson saw the impact of the City’s 60% cut to public litter basket collections on 30th Avenue, a bustling commercial corridor near her home. The group she organized now meets each Sunday and has expanded to include Broadway and Ditmars Boulevards. CM Constantinides commended the group’s work and U.S. Representative Carolyn Maloney volunteered at a cleanup at Rainey Park. The group has led 70+ cleanup events since its founding.⁵¹

SEQCleanup (Jamaica) was the brainchild of Karen Irby-Lawson (known as DJ Nett) who wanted to address the rise in unsanitary conditions in the neighborhood linked to sanitation budget cuts and encourage fitness and movement outdoors during the pandemic.⁵² The group began activities in July 2020 and has since held dozens of cleanups, often accompanied by hip hop music by local DJs. SEQCleanup has also participated in mural painting and beautification projects.⁵³ The group received a grant from Partnerships for Parks to support its work.



Abuela Neighborhood Maintenance

Source: Angela Miskis via Instagram

There are 18 to 19 private carting companies in Queens licensed by the Business Integrity Commission (BIC) to collect putrescible and/or recyclable waste from approximately 107,800 commercial customers in New York City (i.e., office buildings, retail establishments, restaurants, hotels, factories, distribution centers). Of these, about 12 are small companies that own one or two trucks.

Citywide data from the Business Integrity Commission (BIC) showed a Q2 2020 decrease of 660 tons per day in commercial waste tonnage in New York City in 2020 as compared to the same period in 2019.¹ This translates to a \$1.54M monthly revenue loss for the City’s transfer stations and \$3.5M monthly revenue loss for private haulers, respectively.² Citywide, by September 2020, some haulers were reporting drops of 70 to 90% in their collected volumes.³ One Queens hauler reported a 38% drop in tonnage from their Manhattan routes and a 14% drop in Queens routes.⁴ The impact has been hardest for locally-owned companies, which have seen much of their business taken up by larger companies like Waste Management, a nationally-owned and publicly traded company.

The shift from commercial to residential waste also meant nearly half of the private waste hauling employees lost their jobs by October 2020, with those remaining seeing a sharp decline in hours. Queens-based Royal Waste at one point let go of 60 to 70 employees, only some of whom have since been re-hired.⁵ More seriously, being classified as “essential” required these employees to work at the height of the pandemic, with hundreds contracting COVID-19 according to union officials. In some cases, according to one, “entire shops were wiped out.”⁶

1.“Waste Equity Law.” New York City Department of Sanitation, <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/site/resources/reports/waste-equity-law>. Accessed 10 December 2020.
2 Mitchell, Adam. Received by Wylie Goodman, Re: Names and / or number of WTS in Queens, 17 March 2021.
3 Rosengren, Cole. New York Sanitation Commissioner Warns against ‘Devastating’ Budget Cuts Ahead of Resignation, Waste Dive, 14 Sept. 2020, www.wastedive.com/news/new-york-sanitation-commissioner-garcia-resign-mayor/585011/.
4 Ibid.
5 Velasquez, Joesfa. “Private Garbage Haulers: ‘Essential Workers’ Widely Unemployed as Businesses Shut Down and Cut Back.” The City, 6 October 2020, <https://www.thecity.nyc/work/2020/10/6/21505101/private-garbage-haulers-essential-workers-unemployed>.
6 Ibid.

Private Commercial Waste Hauling



Commercial Waste Hauling Vehicle in CD12
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member



Paradise Community Garden
Source: Sonia Ferraro

Volunteer Community Composting and Food Scrap Drop-Off Sites

The temporary suspension of Curbside Organics Collection and budget cuts to FSDOs and compost processing led some Queens residents to creatively fill the gaps.

Astoria Pug (Western Queens) creators Caren Tedesco Cardoso and Lou E. Reyes, along with now-local celebrity dog Rocky the Pug, identified community gardens and farms that would accept organic waste and — with help from volunteers — used these locations to set up boot-strapped FSDOS.⁵⁴ By October 2020, the group had 916 subscribers to its weekly newsletter, which teaches neighbors how to compost, offers tips on sustainable living, promotes local sustainable groups and businesses, and lets subscribers know where and when FSDOs are open. Their now 80+ person volunteer team supports four FSDOs visited by over 200 Queens residents every weekend. New sites and once-a-week FSDO pick-up services continue growing.

Paradise Community Garden (Jamaica) founded by Sonia Ferraro became the first public FSDO site in District 28 in Southeast Queens to provide a needed outlet for community composting. Before COVID-19 and the City’s budget cuts, the community never received Curbside Organics Collections. Now Paradise Garden is

helping the neighborhood divert food scraps and yard waste and turn it into an environmental resource. The garden Sonia and her members run not only “nourishes the soil and soul” but also produces food and a thriving, peaceful, and beautiful community space for the neighborhood.⁵⁵

Garden Of Resilience (Springfield Gardens, Rosedale, and Laurelton) is the first community garden serving these Southeast Queens communities. An abandoned lot served as the catalyst to empower local youth to organize and encourage residents to sign a petition to have the lot transferred to NYC Parks. Students from P.S. 156, The Linden SDA School, and P.S. 132 collected signatures near the Laurelton LIRR station while cleaning and beautifying the space. The garden signed a contract with GreenThumb in February 2020, but when COVID-19 hit the build-out stopped. Residents cleaned the lot and collectively decided to use the space to grow vegetables for free to address food insecurity. The group plans to highlight the importance of Green Civics by developing an interactive curriculum accessible through QR codes. They recently became the first community garden in District 31 to serve as a food scrap drop-off site.⁵⁶

Woodside Sunnyside Composting (Woodside, Sunnyside Plus+) serves as an FSDO every Sunday from 2 to 5 p.m. Since the onset of COVID-19, the group has received five to six times the amount of organic matter for processing than they did previously. The group has expanded to include growing produce for mutual aid pantries, with 450 lbs. donated as of mid-November 2020.⁵⁷



Rocky the Pug of Astoria Pug
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member

Online Resources

To meet the new waste and sustainability challenges posed by COVID-19, some Queens community members turned their talents toward creating online tools and resources.

[We Radiate](#) began tracking self-reported compost collection impacts across New York State in late 2020. The site tallies compost collection by county and estimates the greenhouse gas emissions saved through the compost process. The site reported that between December 9, 2020 and January 28, 2021, three Queens sites (Astoria Pug, Queens Botanical Garden, and Smiling Hogshhead Ranch) together collected/processed 114,972 lbs. of compost, removing 39.7 tons of greenhouse gas emissions from the environment and saving the City \$24,776 in export costs.⁵⁸

Queens resident Belinda Chiu, creator of the website [A Healthy Blueprint](#), saw a need to help people quickly find and track volunteer-run FSDOs. Her website and blog provides FSDO locations and schedules, food scraps accepted, and additional ways people can support these volunteer organizations. As of March 2021, her site listed 24 active FSDOs in Queens.⁵⁹ Another site, the [Food Scrap Drop-Off Map](#) by Yvonne Chow and Griffin Boyd, shows an even wider array of private and nonprofit food scrap options across New York City.⁶⁰

[Buy Nothing Groups](#) have been around since 2013 but now boast 13 affiliates in Queens.⁶¹ The BNG mission involves “local groups form[ing] gift economies that are complementary and parallel to local cash economies.”⁶² The founders explain that “whether people join because they’d like to quickly get rid of things that are cluttering their lives, or simply to save money by getting things for free, they quickly discover that our groups are not just another free recycling platform.” Users post “gifts,” such as household items large (furniture) and small (unused nail polish) available for sharing. While data on their impact is anecdotal, the benefits of reusing rather than purchasing suggest these new groups will outlast the pandemic.⁶³

[Community Fridges](#) that keep food from being wasted became critical this past year for people newly struggling with food insecurity. A [map](#) by NYCFrame.com shows 22 listed in Queens. Community Fridges represent another spontaneous community-generated response to COVID. The NYC Community Fridge map is developing an app to help drivers and fridge keeper volunteers coordinate pickups and deliveries.

[Mutual Aid Groups](#) became another community response to COVID-19 with 17 in Queens listed on the Mutual Aid NYC website. Although not specifically waste focused, these groups — many run exclusively through online platforms — facilitate food, clothing, furniture, diaper, and other donations to keep items out of landfills while giving them directly to those in need.

Finally, “[Stooping](#)” Instagram Accounts became a trend last year adopted by groups like [@stoopinginquenees](#) and [@curbalertqueens](#). Visitors capture free “stoop-worthy” goods found on the street while others reveal the now-claimed objects proudly displayed in their homes.



Jamaica Community Fridge
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member

Single-Use Versus Reusables

The pandemic initially generated tension and confusion about the burgeoning reusable, low- and zero-waste movement. Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported early in the pandemic that no evidence existed linking virus transmission to food or surface contact, health and contamination fears lingered. **Over 125 scientists from 18 countries later signed a letter reaffirming the safety of reusables and confirming that single-use items were no better at virus prevention than standard cutlery and dishes.**⁶⁴ Despite this, major brands such as Starbucks and Dunkin’ Donuts banned customers from bringing their own mugs, with smaller establishments following suit.⁶⁵ The U.S. plastics lobbying group, PLASTICS, called on the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to roll back plastic bag bans for health purposes without success.⁶⁶

Unfortunately, single-use plastics have once again become the norm, due in part to businesses’ nervousness about allowing reusables, as well as the logistical realities of take-out and delivery. But with an economic slowdown and travel reduced, there is another reason: the pandemic cut demand for — and thus the price of — oil, the material from which plastics are derived. This has resulted in recycled plastic bottles costing 83% to 93% more to produce than bottles made from virgin plastic.⁶⁷ This is happening at a time in which the first-ever microplastic particles were found in human placenta,⁶⁸ and plastic pollution is projected to increase by 40% over the next decade.⁶⁹

Fortunately, local efforts have taken shape in Queens to encourage reusables. Examples include stores such as newly opened Earth & Me in Astoria, which promotes “sustainable swaps” of beeswax wraps and refillable detergent containers;⁷⁰ local food establishments like those listed in [Zero Waste Workshop’s](#) tracker

of establishments that accept reusable mugs; and Ridgewood-based Cup Zero, which is on a mission to eliminate waste one cup at a time by providing zero-waste beverage service to large scale, high-volume events. In early 2021 Cup Zero launched a swap-and-go reusable cup app for coffee shops and juice bars.⁷¹

** Greenmarkets, community-supported agriculture, bulk stores, and reusable bags and containers are still some of the best ways to reduce food-shopping packaging and single-use plastic waste. A list of sites is on the QSWAB Organizing Committee website.*

COVID, Waste, and Public Health

Ana Isabel Baptista and Adrienne Perovich, writing for the New School’s Center for New York City Affairs, cite a Harvard study that finds “**a relatively small increase in particulate matter commonly part of airborne pollution is associated with a 15% increase in the COVID-19 death rate.**” The authors note that a higher incidence of COVID deaths among Black and Latinx communities may result from the greater likelihood of their subjection to compromised air quality.⁷² Waste incineration is a leading source of air pollution, with 80% of incinerators located within three miles or less of low-income communities. New York City is unique in that virtually all its garbage is transported outside City limits.⁷³ Nearly a quarter of New York City’s waste is sent to such waste-to-energy facilities around New York State and to towns around the country where it directly impacts the health of low-income residents.⁷⁴ Here in New York City, poor air quality from waste transfer stations and waste-by-rail create similar environmental dynamics in BIPOC neighborhoods.



Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member

Group Type	# of Volunteer Entities
Advocacy	1
Cleanup Groups	6
Community Fridge	22
Food Scrap Drop-Off Sites	1
Food Scrap Drop-Off/Composting Sites	10
Mutual Aid - Donation + Resources	15
Responsible Shopping	3
Total	58

Queens Community Efforts Started During COVID-19 by Type
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee

Queens Community District	# of COVID Community Efforts
1	17
2	3
3	2
4	5
5	5
6	1
7	1
8	1
10	1
12	6
13	2
14	3
81	1
Multiple	10
Grand Total	58

Queens Community Efforts Started During COVID-19 by Community District
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee

Conclusion

A recent [editorial in Crain’s NY Business](#) (4/19/21) argued that, as the City seeks to rebuild post-pandemic, making “our streets less filthy” should be among the City, State, and local businesses’ top priority. Over the past year, the QSWAB Organizing Committee cataloged countless efforts to do just that, some undertaken by a challenged DSNY workforce, others spearheaded by volunteer groups who took up tools and mustered goodwill to lead clean-up efforts, start food-scrap drop-offs, and inspire beautification projects in response to DSNY’s \$106M operational budget cut. In summary, COVID’s impact on Queens’ waste landscape was swift, serious, and will have ripple effects that will last well beyond 2020.

- While electeds and agencies were fearful of moving forward or enforcing waste legislation previously passed (i.e., Plastic Bag Ban, Commercial Waste Zone RFP), in the end their fears overblown. Instead, delays in reducing waste sent to landfills and waste burdens on BIPOC communities worsened what would soon become an unsustainable waste landscape.
- Cuts to an essential agency like DSNY at a time of crisis, especially one in which more of the City’s waste hauling shifted from the private sector to municipal workers, undermined public faith in New York as a well-functioning city. Even with a dramatic decrease in revenue and an increase in costs related to COVID, maintaining cleanliness during a health crisis is one of the clearest signs to the public, along with safety, that the City can protect the public welfare.
- The services provided by waste-related nonprofits, especially those working to save and distribute food, were critical to feeding millions of newly food-insecure New Yorkers.
- Community volunteers were quick to action in pitching in to provide essential services after the City suspended them. We identified nearly 60 entities that formed in the wake of COVID-19 in nearly every Queens Community Board, as summarized in the charts at left.

ENDNOTES

1 Kim, Juliana. “What to Know About N.Y.’s Plastic Bag Ban.” The New York Times, 20 October 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/20/nyregion/what-to-know-new-york-state-ban-plastic-bags.html>.

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