

# The State of Waste in Queens



*Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member*

**A Report by the Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board Organizing Committee**

**April 2021**



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BACKGROUND

The following report, nearly a year in the making, represents the collective effort of over 20 Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board (SWAB) Organizing Committee members and countless government, agency, civic, nonprofit, commercial, and community readers and contributors.

**This report provides a baseline for measuring Queens’ contributions to New York City’s goal of sending zero-waste to landfills by the year 2030.**

The report also introduces the QSWAB Organizing Committee (soon to be formally recognized) to Queens residents, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the civic group’s role as a legally mandated advisor to the Queens Borough President and local electeds on the City’s Solid Waste Management Plan.

The report begins by exploring Queens’ **Waste Statistics**, highlighting the materials residents use and discard and how well or poorly we divert recoverable resources from our waste stream. Given the City’s rising export costs, the way improperly managed organics contributes to climate change, and the environmental impacts of landfills and incineration on environmental justice communities, examining our borough’s waste behaviors is critical to helping the City pilot and implement prevention and intervention strategies.

One way to understand **Community Needs** around waste is through facilitated listening sessions. Due to the social distancing constraints of COVID-19, we turned instead to publicly available data that captured how Queens residents want to improve their waste landscape. Using 311 data, Community Board (CB) *FY21 Annual Needs Statements*, and Participatory Budgeting submissions, we captured the waste-related priorities and services residents want in order to address local challenges.

Although the conversation around waste often skews negative, this report also highlights Queens’ **Community Assets** related to recycling, diversion, and resource recovery. Among these are a nationally recognized small compost processor, a nonprofit that provides meals by rescuing food from commercial establishments, and countless volunteer groups providing food scrap diversion and compost processing to replace services lost this past year due to COVID budget cuts.

Because waste has often been linked to public health, we next examine how Queens residents view the **Impact of Waste** on their lives. We created a broad online survey completed by over 400 respondents and administered a narrower, in-person survey at three waste-collection sites. With a focus on environmental justice, we also held in-depth conversations with leaders from Community Districts 5 and 12 who have fought for decades to address waste inequities caused, respectively, by outmoded diesel trains carrying construction and demolition debris and unenclosed waste transfer stations.

**COVID-19 Impacts** to the City and borough were far-reaching, affecting both waste output and public sector services. Queens’ pandemic experience as it relates to waste serves to remind us why a clean city is critical to public confidence and urges us to heed the lessons of COVID to ensure we are prepared for the next health or economic crisis.

Finally, we conclude the report with policy and practice **Recommendations** designed to engage a broad range of stakeholders. If we want to achieve a zero-waste future, we need all parties at the table and mutually committing to the change we want to see.





**Queens SWAB Organizing Committee Meetings and Events: 2018 - 2021**  
Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee members

# ABOUT THE QUEENS SOLID WASTE ADVISORY BOARD ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

In early 2020, the [Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board \(QSWAB\) Organizing Committee](#) established as its mission to serve as a trusted voice advocating for fairness, equity, and anti-racism within the waste sector in Queens. In carrying out the functions of the citizens' board as outlined in the City's Administrative Code ([§ Title 16-317](#); [§ Title 16-318](#)), the QSWAB Organizing Committee aimed to raise awareness about the importance of responsible waste management and resource recovery on the local, state, and regional environment and the health and well-being of Queens' communities. The group shared information and resources with the Queens Borough President, Queens City Council Members, Queens Community Boards, and the public via meeting agendas and minutes maintained from January 2018 through March 2021.

Prior to the QSWAB Organizing Committee, Queens had a SWAB from 1989, shortly after passage of [Local Law 1989](#) the Mandatory Recycling Law, until approximately 2011 when the group disbanded. In January 2018, five Queens residents reactivated a Queens SWAB, brought together by a shared desire to ensure the borough was contributing to the broader New York City conversation about re-imagining "waste" as a "resource." The group continued to meet monthly, growing from the original five organizers to over 25 attendees by the end of 2020.

From January 2018 until March 2021, the group operated under the name Queens Solid Waste Advisory Board Organizing Committee due to lack of formal recognition. Encouraged by New York City Council Member Antonio Reynoso (Chair of the New York City Council's Sanitation and Solid Waste Committee), Queens Borough President Donovan Richards began the legal process to appoint a formally recognized QSWAB. Applications were posted on the Queens Borough President's website in February 2021 and a new group with formal recognition was appointed in April 2021.

SWABs are required to have at least 20 members representing a diverse range of constituencies that may include representatives from Community Boards, recycling and carting industry representatives, environmental organizations, government agencies, labor and business groups, property owners, tenant organizations, and the general public. Like Community Boards, SWAB members are appointed by the Borough President with additional input from local elected officials. Members are expected to serve two-year terms in a voluntary, unpaid capacity.

Each borough's SWAB is responsible for submitting to their respective Borough President an annual recycling plan and advising him or her on the following:

1. recycling and reduction goals, and the methods proposed to achieve such goals;
2. means to encourage community participation in the recycling program; and
3. means to promote the recycling program and educate the public about the program.

Both [Manhattan](#) and [Brooklyn](#) have had active SWABs for decades. A [Bronx SWAB](#), inactive for many years, began taking shape with new leadership in November 2020 with new leaders formally appointed in March 2021. Only Staten Island currently lacks an active SWAB. The SWABs' work today extends beyond annual recycling reporting to include advocating around issues ranging from mandatory composting to pharmaceutical diversion that inform the City's public policy and practices.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New York City last submitted a Comprehensive [Solid Waste Management Plan](#) (SWMP) to New York State’s Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) in 2006, five years after the City’s last-remaining landfill, Fresh Kills, closed.<sup>1</sup> The SWMP detailed how the NYC Department of Sanitation’s (DSNY) Bureau of Solid Waste Management would reduce and dispose of residential waste, residential recycling, and commercial waste for the next 20 years — until 2025.<sup>2</sup>

When the City’s Independent Budget Office reviewed the plan at its halfway mark, they discovered something unexpected: predictions about the City’s waste output had been overstated. The SWMP envisioned a nearly 21% increase in curbside and containerized waste, but by 2017 residential waste had decreased by nearly 9% from a high of 13,456 tons per day in 2007 to 12,246 tons in 2016.<sup>2</sup> As of DSNY’s Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 Annual Report, tonnage had declined further to 10,154 per day.<sup>3</sup>

DSNY will soon draft a new SWMP to guide policy for the next 20 years. But in light of the challenges inherent in forecasting, combined with the still-uncertain realities about City life post-pandemic, it may be time for a collective pause to ask how are we doing *now* in terms of residential and commercial waste management?

For the purpose of this report, our focus is not on the City overall but a single borough: Queens. Queens is the most ethnically diverse urban area in the world,<sup>4</sup> with the City’s largest land mass (178 square miles).<sup>5</sup> And how Queens is doing in terms of waste management may be an indicator for conditions Citywide.

Queens is also home to the QSWAB Organizing Committee members who wrote this report. Founded in January 2018 to serve as an interim guide to elected officials, City agencies, and residents in advance of formal appointment by an incoming Queens Borough President, the group wanted to address waste by not only reporting quantitative data but also telling the stories of people working outside formal structures to manage resources, reduce waste, and ensure a more equitable environment for all.

Here is what the data and Queens residents told us.

## What is the current state of waste and resource recovery in Queens?

Queens residents throw out trash in numbers nearly equal to their share of New York City’s total population and recycle at nearly the same rate. But **while some Queens Community Districts divert recyclable materials (Paper, Metal-Glass-Plastic-Cartons, Organics) at levels approaching DSNY’s 2020 Recycling Goal of 25%, others are as low as 13%.** This suggests a clear need to tailor education and outreach to communities’ unique dynamics to ensure full participation across the borough in removing recoverable materials from our waste stream.

One reason diversion rates lag is unequal access to resources. For example, **only 9 of Queens’ 14 Community Districts, or 46% of Queens’ households, had access to Curbside Organics Collections (COC) prior to the COVID-19 Citywide suspension.** While voluntary COC has not yet realized the promise of recovering the 34% or more of organic materials New Yorkers now pay to export to landfills — and diverting it to beneficial uses (i.e., compost) — failure to provide COC, along with a lack of local, alternative diversion options (i.e., food-scrap drop-off sites, community garden compost bins), guarantees that participation rates will remain low when COC returns in Fall 2021 and that widespread acceptance around separating food waste, should Mandatory Organics legislation be passed, is unlikely.

Finally, while Queens is thought of as a borough of single-family homes, **many of the borough’s large buildings (10 units or more) are not taking full advantage of free DSNY diversion programs that could further eliminate textile and e-waste from the waste stream.** More information is needed to determine what distinguishes participating from non-participating buildings, but the fact that 638 of Queens’ 422,970 (.15%) larger buildings are enrolled in refashion NYC and 3,497 in eCycle NYC (.82%) is a missed opportunity.

## What are Queens residents and organizations doing to help the borough manage waste and resources?

In the wake of COVID-19, countless Queens residents, nonprofits, businesses, and institutions stepped up in ways large and small to contribute to waste management and resource recovery in the borough. The last year saw the activation of at least nine cleanup groups, 17 volunteer-led food scrap drop-off sites, and an overall increase in businesses supporting zero-waste practices. From buy-nothing groups (15) that encourage reuse to sustainability/beautification advocacy nonprofits (8), **this report identified nearly 200 Queens community assets — some long-established others newly formed — that directly or indirectly help Queens residents contribute to a greener, cleaner borough.**

Yet as with recycling diversion, **community assets are not always distributed equally.** We found in our research that Astoria and Long Island City were represented by 20 or more assets, while neighborhoods like Bayside, Hollis, and College Point had less than five. DSNY’s own data showed that, compared to other boroughs, Queens ranked third in the number of its retail, repair, and reuse outlets. Council Member Keith Power and Antonio Reynoso’s proposed [Community Organics and Recycling Empowerment \(CORE\) Act](#), which would ensure a minimum of three food-scrap drop-off sites and potentially more compost-processing sites in each Community District, could help level the playing field.

## What still needs to be done in Queens and Citywide to achieve the goal of sending zero waste to landfills by 2030?

Although budget cuts linked to COVID-19 have been devastating, there are reasons to feel encouraged about what this period revealed about Queens’ commitment to creating a healthier environment. **Groups like [Rescuing Leftover Cuisine](#), founded by an Astoria resident, last year diverted more than 1.6M lbs. of food from the waste stream by redirecting it to people facing food insecurity.**<sup>6</sup> **Currently though, only one Queens restaurant — a commercial kitchen — partners with the nonprofit.** More Queens restaurants should be enlisted in the effort in 2021.

To ensure Queens youth learn why getting to zero waste is critical to their future as environmental citizens — and how they can contribute — far more Queens public schools need to be brought into the fold. **Currently, approximately half (148) of Queens 377 DOE schools are included in DSNY’s Organics Collection, but less than 20 engage in higher-level zero waste educational offerings, including [Zero Waste Pledge](#), [S.E.E.D.](#), and [Race Against Waste](#).**<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the nonprofit [Cafeteria Culture](#), which successfully engaged youth to pass [Local Law 142 of 2013 banning single-service foam food and beverage containers](#), among their many accomplishments, has only worked in 10 Queens public schools.<sup>8</sup>

That needs to change.

We also know that not all neighborhoods are shouldering the burden of waste externalities equally. **Many of our neighbors in CD12 live in areas that coexist with unenclosed waste transfer stations that release dust, leachate, and particulate matter into the environment. In CD5, transporting of waste by rail has for decades polluted the air and land in ways activists are still fighting to have taken seriously.**

As the 20+ volunteers who researched, wrote, edited, and designed this report — in the middle of a pandemic during one of the worst economic crises in modern history — we know this document is just the start of a longer conversation with local electeds, agencies, and community stakeholders about our borough’s waste and resource recovery accomplishments and challenges. Notably, **the report barely touches on waste produced by restaurants, retailers, hospitals, offices, and other businesses, which in 2018 were estimated by the New York City Comptroller to generate 13,000 tons of solid waste every day, representing over half of the City’s overall solid waste output.**<sup>9</sup> The next step is to track progress over time and, ideally, inform the next SWMP.

In addition to reading the report, we encourage people to visit our website to find local resources, see data visualizations, and read summaries from three years of guest presenters to learn what experts and innovators in the field recommend as best practices.

In the end, with support from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors — and if we each do our part — **Queens can lead the way in sending zero waste to landfills by 2030.**



# INTRODUCTION



**Flushing Meadows Corona Park**

*Photo Source: Queens SWAB Organizing Committee member*

Many who write about New York City’s history of waste focus on its landfills and for good reason. Landfills served as the earliest solution to managing the City’s refuse and still function as a resting place for much of the trash we generate today. That we have built so many City landmarks on landfill debris — the World Financial Center, Staten Island Ferry Terminal, Battery Park City, FDR Drive, South Street Seaport, and others — attests to their massive scale.<sup>1</sup>

Queens has its own infamous history when it comes to landfills. Fifty years before the City formalized a “Street Cleaning Department” in the mid-1800s, Jamaica Bay was the center of the City’s waste-management industries.<sup>2</sup> The borough’s most notorious landfill, Edgemere, opened in 1938 — a decade before Freshkills — and by the time it closed in 1991 was “the longest continuously operating dump in the United States,” receiving more than 9M cubic yards of waste over its lifetime.”<sup>3</sup>

There was, however, one encouraging event that took place at Edgemere. A year before it closed, DSNY’s Borough of Waste Prevention, Reuse, and Recycling “formally incorporated composting into its larger recycling program by composting 1,000 tons of leaves under a pilot project” based at Edgemere.<sup>4</sup>

New York City’s waste management practices have come a long way in the 31 years since Edgemere closed. In 2013, the City established a Curbside Organics Collection Pilot to collect food and yard waste directly from households.<sup>5</sup> Zero waste education is available today in all public schools that want access.<sup>6</sup> And righting the wrongs of waste inequity and environmental injustice in BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color) communities engages a broader audience than ever before.<sup>7</sup>

But problems remain in how our borough — and the City — manage waste. We spend energy recovering plastics that may ultimately be unusable.<sup>8</sup> We continue landfilling organic material we could instead apply beneficially to improve local soils. And while we no longer bury trash within the borough, we pay exorbitantly to ship it, often in uncovered rail cars, to towns as far away as Virginia, Ohio, and South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> There its harms are keenly felt, often by people who lack the power to have their concerns heard.

Queens’ landfills may be long gone, but our waste problems never left. We just asked other communities to take over its management and disposal. In writing this report, we hope this practice, like Edgemere Landfill, soon reaches its inevitable end.

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