



## **NYC-EJA’s Testimony on Waste Equity for the City Council Zero Waste Hearing**

April 21, 2021

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Tok Oyewole, and I am testifying on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA).

Since 1991, NYC-EJA has led efforts for comprehensive policy reforms to address the disproportionate burden of New York’s solid waste system on a handful of environmental justice communities. The impacts of the solid waste system are greatest in a few low-income and communities of color - North Brooklyn, South Bronx, Southeast Queens, and Sunset Park - where truck-dependent transfer stations are clustered, causing higher proportions of health consequences such as asthma, heart disease, and various cancers than elsewhere in the City. The South Bronx has one of the highest death and disease rates from asthma, and complications from COVID-19, in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Outside of NYC, we rely on a system of truck-based export, where our waste is sent to landfills and incinerators in neighboring or distant communities, from as nearby as predominantly Black and brown Newark, New Jersey,<sup>2</sup> to as far away as Virginia and South Carolina. The pollutants arising from incinerators can vary depending on what is being burned, concentrating toxins that lead to cancers or other health defects such as dioxins, lead, and cadmium in the ash that is then transferred to landfills or hazardous material sites. Burning large amounts of trash in combustion chambers, some incinerators use heat to produce electricity, similar to the technology of a coal plant; although there is an attempt to claim that “waste-to-energy” is sustainable, it is one of the most emission-intensive ways to generate energy, and the health, environmental, and climate impacts are manifold, including up to 2.5 more greenhouse gases than coal-based energy production.<sup>3 4</sup>

Liquid leachate from transfer stations and landfills pollutes nearby waterways with an array of compounds, along with the disintegration of plastics, and larger single-use materials produced and littered. Traditionally, it is low-income communities that suffer from the poorest waste management services and infrastructure - a case in point is NYCHA, which, in a development of low-income housing

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.thecity.nyc/health/2020/4/3/21210372/bronx-residents-twice-as-likely-to-die-from-covid-19-in-nyc>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newarkcitynewjersey,US/PST045219>

<sup>3</sup> New Jersey’s Dirty Secret: The Injustice of Incinerators and Trash Energy in New Jersey’s Frontline Communities, February 2021. EarthJustice, Ironbound Community Corporation, et al.

<sup>4</sup> False Solutions. Gas and trash: how the fossil fuel industry is holding back a just transition, NY Renews



with a population that approximates the size of Atlanta, has a recycling rate near 0%, with inadequate bin locations and collection procedures.

It is clear that our current system of over-reliance on excess waste generation and export to facilities is not only unsustainable, but polluting and poisoning environmental justice communities, and our planet. We are here today to advocate for improvements in the City's waste system, specifically calling for some key policies to reduce burdens in and out of the City. We think these investments and policies would dramatically improve equity for environmental justice and frontline communities, and ensure the City's commitments to its stated goals.

**Additionally, while the de Blasio administration's goals initially included a call to divert all of our waste from landfills, NYC would be remiss to ignore the opportunity to divert from incinerators which in some cases generate electricity, albeit through dirty, greenhouse-gas emitting mechanisms, and in most cases, pollute the bodies of primarily low-income Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities nearby.**

**Materials and Waste Reduction:** We support the development of legislation to reduce the amount of waste generated in the first place, as recycling is not a 100% efficient method of converting materials and requires resource input to complete (transport, energy, labor). We urge the city to explore and implement comprehensive reusables programs in food retail, restaurants, shipping, personal care, and household products to circumvent a large portion of our city's avoidable single-use product stream, including by providing financial and educational investments into businesses to implement. We hope to see textile origination labeling and stocking reduction to prevent extractive and polluting practices and avoid the 6% of waste from NYC that is textiles. We hope to see donation programs for food and other goods, requiring partnerships with retailers - and we urge for comprehensive demand planning tools and technologies to avoid waste in retail and restaurants, as well as independent waste audits. We are happy to discuss the best ways of reducing other waste streams as well.

**Organics and Composting Budget:** As colleagues in the Save Our Compost Coalition have shared, we are proposing a moderate budget proposal of \$14.75 million dollars for the upcoming fiscal year - that girds us for full implementation of citywide mandatory organics collection and processing in the near term (next fiscal year at the latest) - inclusive of an expanded food-scrap drop off program that compensates workers, funding of the Zero Waste Schools program funding, a multi-family building Collection and Processing Pilot-to-Implementation inclusive of NYCHA, and more.



Of critical importance is the **expansion of local community composting sites**, which divert waste from transfer stations and other waste infrastructure, but also provides valuable community education and services. In order to compost the growing volume of food scraps generated in the Food Scrap Drop-off program and build capacity for localizing organic waste processing and green jobs in composting, the City should fund in the short term \$3.5 million for the development of 6 community composting sites throughout the city on Parks and/or other city land to provide equitably-sited composting resources throughout the city, and preserve the existing sites whose futures are at risk in Western Queens (Big Reuse), and Lower Manhattan (LES Ecology Center), and Governors Island (Earth Matter NY). We urge the city to ease restrictions on up-and-coming microhaulers, who often employ young people of color to divert organic waste using zero- and low-emissions vehicles.

**We would like to see the full life cycles of the organics programs, including where 100% of the food scraps collected end up, to ensure that food scraps do not end up going into transfer stations, incinerators, or landfills, such as what occurred with some of the food scraps collected through the partial curbside program, via the Newtown Creek’s anaerobic digestion facility.**

**Robust Universal Organics Program:** We request that feasibility studies and pilots be done by the end of 2021 for rapid and thoughtful implementation of a robust, citywide mandatory organics program, as soon as 2022. Reallocating surplus funds from bloated budgets in the City such as the NYPD’s overtime budget, or federal funds into the City for environmental and climate initiatives, are potential ways to fund this necessary program, which needs to be coupled with local processing increases. We have until 2030 to curb GHG emissions to prevent global warming above 1.5 degrees celsius, and so we must advance bold decisions in the near-term - this means building the infrastructure now to plan for when we can manage all of our City’s organics capacity.

**Commercial Waste Zones & Transfer Stations:** We and the Transform Don’t Trash Coalition are glad to see that the City Council’s budget response has affirmed our ask for staffing and oversight of the Commercial Waste Zones system passed in Local Law 199 of 2019.

We particularly want to see facilities that have not been in compliance with laws relating to public health and safety either 1) not contracted with in the CWZ system or 2) brought up to code without any further delay.

We urge the City to ensure that waste facilities in Southeast Queens are brought up to health and safety codes, having been “grandfathered” into a mixed residential M1 zone. In solidarity with the wishes of the community, we want to see an upholding of the capacity reductions under the Waste Equity law.



**New York City Environmental Justice Alliance**

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On the ground – and at the table

Lastly today, the City has committed to building the Gansevoort Marine Transfer Station by 2026, to displace the quantity of metals, glass, plastics, and paper going to transfer stations in communities of color, using a more efficient mode of transport than heavy-duty diesel trucks. When this happens, we hope that the single-use materials that go to this facility are much lower in quantity and processed locally in sustainable ways. This facility requires coordination between the City and the State, and as 2026 is approaching, we are requesting to see the City’s plans for the build out of the project this year.

Thank you for the opportunity to raise these urgent concerns pertaining to zero waste, waste equity, and greenhouse gas and co-pollutant reductions. We encourage you to invest in the development of long-term waste reduction and waste equity plans, to reduce burdens unjustly faced by a handful of communities in and out of NYC, and to better preserve our planet’s limited resources.