

Frequently Asked Questions

About FoodCycle

Why have we implemented this food scraps program?

This program has two main goals. The first is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which are generated by the decomposition of food scraps in the landfill, and the second is to reduce the amount of food scraps going to landfill disposal. Food scraps are by far the largest remaining item Sunnyvale residents are disposing in their garbage carts. A waste characterization conducted for the City by Cascadia Consulting Group found that food scraps made up 33 percent of the garbage collected from single-family residences. No other single component was higher than 6.5 percent.

The City currently sends 8,000 tons of residential food scraps to the landfill each year. When disposed of in a landfill, food is decomposed by anaerobic bacteria that produce methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. Keeping the food scraps from the landfill is important not only as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also helps Sunnyvale meet its zero waste goals of 75 percent diversion by 2020 and 90 percent by 2030.

What City and State goals does this program support?

On April 23, 2013, Council adopted the Zero Waste diversion goal of 75 percent by 2020. The most recent official state measure of Sunnyvale diversion was 65 percent in 2015. The Zero Waste Strategic Plan identifies food scraps as by far the largest remaining item Sunnyvale residents are disposing in their garbage carts. Based on collections to date, the combination of commercial and residential food scraps collection is projected to increase the City's 2018 diversion rate to 68 percent.

Diverting food from landfill disposal also helps the City meet its Climate Action Plan goals by reducing the amount of methane created when food decomposes in the landfill.

Organics separation and collection is already mandated by the state for businesses by Assembly Bill 1826, and the City has been assisting businesses and schools with the implementation of food scraps collection service for several years.

How do you know this program will work?

A 500+ home pilot program was conducted in 2015 and was effective in gaining high levels of resident participation (73 percent) and capture of available food scraps (62 percent). Based on this success, Council approved a Citywide rollout of food scraps service, which was completed by the end of 2017.

A detailed "lid flipping" cart study conducted in early 2018 found that 55 percent of customers were placing their food scraps (and only food scraps) in the correct side of the FoodCycle cart. Collection truck scale records confirm that 55 percent (by weight) of residential food scraps are being captured by the FoodCycle program.

Why not put food in with yard trimmings or in a separate container?

Food scraps composting capacity in and near the Bay Area is very limited. It is also expensive and difficult to permit new facilities that compost food, whether mixed with yard trimmings or not. Combining food scraps with yard trimmings in Sunnyvale would generate 20,000 tons of material and there are no facilities available to take that quantity. Keeping the food scraps separate from yard trimmings enables more options for reuse, whether processed into animal feed or used in anaerobic digestion for energy. If we used a separate container for food scraps, the extra trucks and carts needed would increase collection costs and cause additional wear and tear on the streets from collection truck traffic. Residents would also have to store four carts instead of three.

The outreach information says 33 percent of residential waste is food. Where did that number come from?

A waste characterization study was conducted for the City by Cascadia Consulting Group in 2010. The study found that food scraps made up 33 percent of the garbage collected from single-family residences. No other single component was higher than 6.5 percent.

Are commercial businesses and schools required to recycle their food scraps?

Yes. A mandatory food scraps collection law, Assembly Bill 1826, was passed several years ago that requires businesses to separate and recycle their organics. The City has been collecting food scraps from businesses for over five years. City staff are currently assisting with food scraps collection implementation at large companies in the first phase of the program, and smaller businesses and schools in the second phase. This program is recycling over 3,000 tons per year and growing steadily as more businesses are added.

Are mobile home communities included in FoodCycle?

Yes. Mobile home communities have FoodCycle service. Residents should contact their property manager for questions about the FoodCycle program at their site.

Are townhouses and apartments included in FoodCycle?

All homes receiving single-family cart service (including townhouses with that service) are included in FoodCycle. The City plans to expand FoodCycle to apartments that have “cart” service at a future date. Apartments with “bin” service are not included in the FoodCycle program at this time. Barriers to success include high contamination rates for shared food containers and high resident turnover rates in many multi-family complexes. The City is researching ways to overcome those barriers.

What use is being made of the food scraps and who is processing them?

Currently, food scraps are being used primarily as an ingredient in animal feed. After being unloaded and pre-processed at the SMaRT Station, the food scraps are converted to a liquid “mash,” pumped into a tanker truck and delivered to a processing plant. There they are sterilized, dehydrated and made into a dry food product. Before being shipped to hog farmers, each batch is tested to confirm it meets federal Food and Drug Administration requirements. The material may not be fed to cows or any species other than pigs, poultry and fish. To learn more about the animal feed process, visit ForktoFeed.com.

At times (e.g., if the processing facility is shut down for maintenance), the vendor takes the mash to the East Bay Municipal Utility District treatment plant to be pumped into sewage treatment digesters and converted into energy-rich methane gas that helps power the plant.

Is the animal feed product safe for the animals consuming it?

Yes. It is produced by a safe process that conforms with USDA regulations, which allow this ingredient to be fed to pigs, poultry and fish. The collected material is heated and sterilized in an industrial facility and each batch of finished product is tested to verify that it meets USDA requirements. The current market is for feeding pigs. The material may not be fed to cows or any species other than pigs, poultry and fish. For more information on the animal feed process visit ForktoFeed.com.

Why is the food scraps side of the cart so large?

At the City's request, Specialty Solid Waste worked with the cart and truck manufacturers to test several designs, including (1) making the food side of the cart narrower and (2) angling the cart divider to increase the capacity of the garbage side. The first design caused garbage to fall into and contaminate the food scraps hopper of the truck. The second resulted in bagged garbage failing to fall out of the cart during collection. The current cart design enables both compartments to empty reliably into the correct sides of the truck hoppers. The City has asked Specialty to continue to work with the cart manufacturer on ideas for reducing the size of the food scraps compartment.

I don't generate much food waste, why do I need to participate?

Even if you generate a small amount of food scraps, there will be times when you likely have food to get rid of. For example, leftovers that have spoiled, extra food from holiday meals, Halloween pumpkins and spoiled fruit and vegetables from back yard trees and gardens can all be placed in the food side of the cart. Additionally, trimmings from meal preparation, plate scrapings after eating, emptying out to-go containers and fridge and pantry clean-outs can also be included. If you have no food scraps for the week, you can leave the food side of the cart empty.

I compost in my back yard; how do I participate?

The curbside food scrap program puts to good use food items that are not suitable for home composting. This includes meat, cheese, and other dairy scraps that should not be included in backyard compost. Spoiled leftovers, food from a refrigerator or pantry clean-out, extras from holiday meals, meat, bones and dairy, egg shells, citrus peelings, fallen fruit from back yard trees, etc., can also be placed in the food side of the cart.

Can't I just put food scraps down my garbage disposal?

Incidental amounts of food are unavoidable in your garbage disposal, but collecting food scraps in the FoodCycle cart allows for a better use of the nutrient value of the material.

Will we have a rodent problem with the program?

When we tested this system during the pilot program, it did not create issues with rodents.

What type of plastic bag should I use to put my food scraps in?

You can use compostable bags or you can reuse produce, bread or other plastic bags so long as they are clear (not opaque). You may also wrap the food scraps in newspaper and place them into the cart. The plastic and paper will get screened out during the pre-processing of the food scraps, so they will not have an impact on the final product. We have also confirmed that Costco and Amazon carry

compostable and clear bags in a size that fits the pails.

Can I use twist ties to tie off the plastic bag before placing into the food side of the split cart?

No, please tie a knot in the top of the bag. The twist ties have metal in them that is difficult to remove during pre-processing of the food scraps.

What if I have extra garbage that won't fit in my cart?

Extra garbage that does not fit in the garbage side of the cart can be bagged and placed curbside with an Extra Garbage Bag Tag purchased at local grocery stores, the SMaRT Station, Community Center and City Hall Annex. Go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "Extra Garbage Tags" to find locations.

Another option is to place extra garbage out for a no-charge On-Call Collection appointment (residents get two appointment per year). Use the Sunnyvale Recycles Right app or call Utilities Customer Service at 408-730-7400 to schedule a collection.

The City also has no charge, Extra Dumping Weekend events scheduled in spring and fall each year. For a current schedule, go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "Extra Dumping Weekends."

Doesn't the food and garbage get mixed together when the truck picks up the materials?

No. The truck has two compartments. One side collects the garbage and the other side, separated by a divider, collects the food scraps.

Why not use a different truck to pick up a separate container for food scraps?

Using the same split cart/split truck technology to pick up garbage and food scraps allows the City to add food scraps service without increasing the number of trucks and carts in use. This keeps the cost of collecting food scraps low and does not increase wear and tear on streets from collection truck traffic.

FoodCycle service rates

FoodCycle service is, like yard trimmings and recycling collection, part of the bundle of solid waste services you pay for through refuse collection rates. Those rates are based on the garbage capacity of the cart that you select for service. Space provided for recycling, yard trimmings, and food scraps is not counted when collection rates are determined. The new rate structure for the FoodCycle carts was designed to return the same amount of revenue as the old structure. If residents stayed in the same size class (small/medium/large), 44 percent saw a small rate increase when the carts were exchanged and 56 percent saw a small decrease.

The proposed 2018/19 refuse collection rates are:

- 27 gallons: \$41.65
- 43 gallons: \$46.88
- 64 gallons: \$53.96

Rates are adjusted annually as part of the City's 20-year financial plan

Is this program costing or saving the City money? If it's saving money, will residents see a reduction in rates?

The City pays our vendor to turn the food scraps into animal feed so there is a cost associated with processing. However, by keeping the material out of the landfill, we save money by eliminating SMaRT Station[®] processing and landfill disposal costs. The resulting net operational savings will help moderate garbage rates in the future.

When were the Zero Waste Policy and FoodCycle Program approved?

The City Council has taken several actions on this program, as listed below:

- In December 2008, Council approved the Zero Waste Policy (RTC 08-358, Council Policy 3.2.4).
- On April 23, 2013, Council adopted the Zero Waste diversion goal of 75 percent by 2020, among other actions.
- To assure market outlets for both the commercial and residential food scraps collection programs, on January 5, 2016, Council approved multi-year contracts with facilities that would accept and recycle the materials collected by those programs. (RTC 15-1075)
<https://sunnyvaleca.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2537770&GUID=595F53D2-1B61-4EB7-BE9B-BC1819BBFB3D&Options=&Search>
- On September 20, 2016, Council reviewed the results of the pilot program conducted in 2015 and approved Citywide implementation of the residential split-cart/split-truck program. (RTC 16-0844)
<https://sunnyvaleca.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=2837911&GUID=33CE68A6-AEF9-46F5-B3BF-CE63F260AFAB&Options=&Search>

Please visit our website regularly for updates. Go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "FoodCycle."