



Boulder, CO Implements Universal Zero Waste Ordinance

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Challenge

Boulder has a long legacy of environmental stewardship. In 1976, residents passionate about conserving natural resources began a voluntary collection of recyclables by using old school buses to collect and store different recyclable materials. In 1989, the city implemented a trash tax on any hauler collecting landfill waste within the city to help fund waste diversion efforts. Boulder then expanded its curbside collection, first in 2001 when it required haulers to pick-up recyclables along with trash and again in 2009 when curbside composting collection was added.

In 2005, the City of Boulder adopted a goal of 85% waste

diversion from the landfill by 2025. Making recycling and composting accessible and affordable to all residents through bundled compost, recycling and trash service was an important step. However, the community's landfill diversion rate (the percentage of waste being recycled and composted) was only at a combined 32%.

The challenges presented by properly separating and collecting waste were a challenge across the community, contributing to the low diversion numbers. Multifamily complexes, with highly transient resident populations and a lack of consistent education and information, were particularly lagging behind. Businesses were also a difficult sector to

get on board, particularly with composting service.

Solution

In 2015, Boulder City Council adopted the Universal Zero Waste Ordinance (UZWO), which requires all properties, businesses and waste haulers to provide composting, recycling and landfill collection services to tenants, residents, customers and employees. The ordinance also requires business owners to separate recyclables and compostables from trash, place bins for each waste stream, post signs on or above all waste bins and train employees on proper sorting

The city did a lot of engagement when shaping the ordinance. An early draft of the ordinance



would have required commercial and multifamily complexes to provide composting, recycling and trash collection services, while residential homes would only have been required to have recycling and trash collections. However, businesses and multifamily property owners asked that everyone be subject to the same requirements, so that no one individual business or property would be disproportionately burdened.

Illegal dumping into others' waste bins was also an issue. There was some pushback from the Boulder Area Rental Housing Association (BARHA) that suggested to council that multifamily property owners be exempt from providing compost service because their tenants are disinterested in proper waste sorting. Council disagreed and insisted that the composting collection service should be available to everyone, renters and homeowners alike. Local nonprofit Eco-Cycle not

only helped the city through its extensive stakeholder process, but also rallied residents to prove to council that this was an issue the city really cared about.

A unique aspect of the Universal Zero Waste Ordinance is that it does not legally require proper sorting of the waste streams, rather it relies on the assumption that if all three waste collection services are accessible, convenient and easy to understand then everyone will use the services properly. The city has created numerous resources to help businesses in this objective, including offering free signs, a step-by-step guidebook and how-to videos. It also requires that businesses train their employees with a Sorting 101 video and sorting quiz, which helps address contamination issues.

Since Boulder does not have municipal trash hauling, the progressive network of waste

haulers within Boulder has also been important in pushing the zero waste initiative forward. By involving all the haulers and requiring them all to provide equal services, no one hauler can undercut another by providing less collection options and cheaper prices.

City and county advisors have worked with over 600 businesses and over 150 commercial property owners on the Universal Zero Waste Ordinance since its adoption. In addition to general advising, the advising team tackled businesses in key areas throughout the city including the Twenty Ninth Street Mall, the Pearl Street Mall and large shopping plazas to help ensure visible places where Boulderites live, work, eat and play are zero waste-ready.

Results

As of 2018, 57% percent of Boulder's waste is diverted



from the landfill through composting, recycling and reuse, compared to 39% in 2015 when the ordinance went into effect. Over 1,200 new compost collection subscriptions were added in Boulder in 2016 alone. The Boulder community now benefits from uniform and consistent waste stream collection services throughout the city. Haulers gain more business from added collection accounts. The Boulder County Recycling Center continues to improve its processes to collect more material and find ways to become more profitable.

Enforcement of the ordinance is largely complaint based, as there are over 7,500 businesses in Boulder. In 2019, the city began to phase in required reporting for restaurants and grocery stores, who have some of the largest compost waste streams. They are required to report their compliance with the ordinance to the city through an online form that includes photos

of their bins and signs

There are many environment benefits to composting and recycling, including climate benefits from reduced methane emissions and reduced resource extraction. Boulder is not only conscious of the impact it has on its immediate community but is also aware of the impact it has on its neighbors and other communities throughout the world.

Next Steps

To continue to reduce its impact, Boulder is learning ways to facilitate a more circular economy. The city hired consulting firm, Metabolic, to conduct an Urban Metabolism Study, a material flow analysis that identifies opportunities and waste within our system. Through the study, Boulder will gain a holistic picture regarding the materials economy and aims to move beyond managing

waste and into reducing waste and consumption by keeping materials in circulation. The study will further analyze how things are being produced and will ideally seed ideas on how to foster a system to create less waste altogether.

The city is also looking to address other large waste streams, like construction and demolition discards, through code requirements and other regulations. The city is aiming to require 65% waste diversion from landfill for future demolition projects in hopes to further divert more materials from the landfill. With less disposable and demolition waste going to the landfill and fostering a circular economy where more items become reused or recycled locally Boulder will continue to drive innovation in reducing waste.

