

HOW AND WHY NEW YORK CITY SHOULD GET TO ZERO WASTE

BY LISA DICAPRIO AND MELISSA ELSTEIN

As New Yorkers, we are too often confronted by overflowing curbside trash bins, mounds of plastic garbage bags lining and blocking the sidewalks, litter (including cigarette butts) collecting on streets, in curbs, within tree beds, and plastic bags in trees and storm drains. Clearly, the city has a trash problem. It's unsightly, certainly, and unsanitary. It also helps breed the rodent population.

Indeed, garbage issues are some of the most common complaints received by Councilwoman Helen Rosenthal's office, as she said during our recent "Recycling and Zero Waste" forum, which we hosted at the West-Park Presbyterian Church, an Upper West Side landmark and cultural center. More than 100 residents from throughout the city attended the Nov. 10 event.

We organized the forum to provide information about the city's new recycling and waste-reduction initiatives and to discuss how residents can help achieve Mayor de Blasio's OneNYC goal of diverting zero waste to landfill by 2030.

City residents produce an average of 12,000 tons of waste every day, which amounts to 3 million tons each year. The average New Yorker throws away 868 pounds of waste a year. Commercial establishments create 7,000 tons of waste daily. Annually, New Yorkers use 5.2 billion plastic bags — most of which end up in landfills, trees and waterways. The city's Department of Sanitation collects 800 million water bottles per year.

Currently, the city's overall recycling rate is just 17 per-

cent. The largest categories of recyclables New Yorkers throw out are organic materials, such as food scraps, but also paper, cardboard, plastic, cans, bottles and metal. Instead of obtaining revenue from these recyclables, the city spends \$350 million a year for waste disposal.

And of course, sending garbage to landfills and incinerators increases greenhouse gas emissions. More than one-third — 36 percent — of all methane emissions (which contribute to global warming) in the U.S. are from landfills.

Our current reliance on plastics has local and global implications. Plastic, manufactured from fossil fuels and chemicals, is not biodegradable. In oceans, plastics photodegrade into progressively smaller pieces creating a "plastic soup" that contaminates the oceanic food chain.

OneNYC's goal to divert zero waste to landfill by 2030 requires new legislation, collective and individual involvement, and money.

Our recommendations:

- Increase funding for the Sanitation and Parks Departments for purchase and installation of trash and recycling bins on streets and in parks. And, for recycling to become habitual, ensuring that trash bins are always complemented by recycling options. Funding should also be provided for additional pickup trucks necessary for recycling in parks. Replace sidewalk wire-mesh trash cans with enclosed trash bins to deter rats.

- Increase funding for a city-wide public education campaign, including public service announcements and subway ads about recycling and waste



reduction, such as to use refillable water bottles. (See www.nyc.gov/greenyc)

- Support City Council Bill Intro. 209-2014, which would place 10-cent fees on plastic and paper single-use bags (with certain exemptions). It costs city taxpayers annually \$10 million to send 100,000 tons of plastic bags to landfills. Currently, 20 Council members, including Rosenthal, support the bag-law bill. See www.bagitnyc.org to sign petitions and for more information. Similar laws have been enacted throughout the U.S. and in other countries, and have helped reduce plastic waste.

- Encourage businesses to reward customers who bring reusable containers for take-away items. Businesses that rely on single-use, non-envi-

ronmentally friendly throw-away containers externalize their costs to taxpayers.

- Enforce anti-littering laws and provide funding for street sweeping. Create incentives for restaurants and bars to provide sidewalk cigarette collection containers, as cigarette butts are the largest source of ocean trash.

- A City Council resolution proclaiming a city recycling awareness day that would correspond with the National Recycling Day every November 15. See www.doonething.org/calendar/recyclingday.htm and www.americarecyclesday.org/

- Promote purchases by individuals, institutions and government of products manufactured with recycled materials.

To confront the enormous societal and economic costs of our waste problem, we need a cultural shift to acknowledge and reduce our trash footprint. While supporting new recycling policy measures, we must also reduce waste and consumption. It really is true that when we throw things away, there is no away.

For more information on the city's ZeroWaste Initiative, as well as resources, visit www1.nyc.gov/assets/dsny/zerowaste/residents.shtml

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Resources:

For the video of our November 10th forum, see www.heleensorosenthal.com/video/

To enroll your building in or request a consultation for various recycling programs available to apartment buildings with 10+ units, see: nyc.gov/organics, www.nyc.gov/etrcycle and www.nyc.gov/refashion

For Greenmarkets where GrowNYC collects food scraps for composting: grownyc.org/compost/locations

To donate reusable materials: www.reusenyc.info

For hazardous materials safe disposal: www.nyc.gov/safedisposal

www.grownyc.org/recycling/facts

www.sims-municipal.com/NYC/Sunset-Park-MRF

www1.nyc.gov/html/onenyc/visions/sustainability/goal-2.html

www.webatetowaste.com

Acknowledgements:

In addition to Councilwoman Helen Rosenthal, panelists at the Nov. 10 forum included Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, Sims Municipal Recycling Education Coordinator Eadaoin Quinn, The Nature Conservancy's New York City Program Director Emily Nobel Maxwell; the city Department of Health's Director of Neighborhood Interventions Pest Control Services' Caroline Bragdon; the city Department of Sanitation's Senior Commercial Program Manager Brett Mons (Bureau of Recycling and Sustainability); GrowNYC representatives Ermin Siljkovic (recycling outreach coordinator) and Thaddeus Copeland (recycling champions program manager).

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