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CBC: City's Organic Waste Collection Plan Too Costly, Cumbersome

By David Giambusso

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The Citizens Budget Commission, in a report issued Tuesday that cites costs and raises questions about capacity, is urging the city to curb its plans for an organic waste collection program.

Organic waste such as food scraps and yard clippings represent a significant part of the de Blasio administration's "zero-waste" goals put forth in its OneNYC plan. Mayor Bill de Blasio has called for the elimination of 90 percent of waste going to landfills by 2030. Last year, the city expanded the neighborhoods where it offered voluntary organic waste pickup and mandated that stadiums, large hotels and large food establishments separate their organic waste from other refuse.

By 2018, the Department of Sanitation hopes to offer residential organic waste pickup for the entire city.

In its 42-page report titled, "Can We Have Our Cake and Compost It Too?," the CBC said the city sanitation department should wait until it has enough capacity to manage the 1.8 million tons of organic waste generated each year before offering such sweeping service. The group also suggests new truck routes and additional collection burdens will increase costs substantially and may exacerbate emissions.

"If the City's residential curbside collection program were expanded citywide, the full costs, net of savings from landfill reduction, would be between \$177 million and \$251 million annually," the report states. "Most of the cost is due to additional collection truck routes; at least 88,000 new truck shifts would be needed each year."

Sanitation Commissioner Kathryn Garcia thanked the CBC for the report, but disagreed with the calculations.

"The CBC report inaccurately reflects the costs of expanding the curbside organics collection program," Garcia said in a statement. "Through operational improvements and shared productivity savings negotiated with our union, we plan to greatly reduce the costs of curbside organics collection."

The CBC made two overarching recommendations in the report: Expand organics collection only where new routes would not be needed and encourage the use of "in-sink disposers," also known as garbage disposals.



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The CBC argues that sending some food waste directly to water treatment plants, where it could be converted into natural gas, would eliminate the need for many additional trucks. Food waste is a potent emitter of greenhouse gases when left to rot in landfills. That same potency, however, makes it a great source of fuel if it can be converted to natural gas, such as the city and others are trying to do.

But the use of garbage disposals is a contentious issue in New York City. Because of the city's archaic combined sewer system, sending tons of food through the water and sewer pipes poses a new burden to the Department of Environmental Protection.

The city releases more than 20 billion gallons of untreated sewage into the waterways each year and adding food to that mix could have deleterious effects.

Garcia, a former DEP official, suggested the idea was a non-starter.

"A dramatic increase in the use of food waste disposers could clog the City's sewers with fats and grease and increase costs for the operation and maintenance of our sewers and wastewater treatment plants," she said.

Questions still remain about capacity.

The city has identified several farms where collected organic waste could be used for compost and is looking to jumpstart waste-to-energy programs like one underway at Newtown Creek, but for now it's unclear where the city and the private sector will put all of the organic waste they plan to collect.

"A survey of composting facilities within 150 miles found available annual capacity for 176,000 tons, which could accommodate just 10 percent of the city's 1.8 million tons of residential and commercial organic waste," the CBC wrote. "However, proposed developments within and outside the city could expand processing capacity significantly in coming years."

A hearing on organic waste collection is scheduled for 10 a.m. Thursday, when the City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste meets in the Council Committee Room.