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2 Penn Plaza ■ 5th Floor ■ New York, New York 10121

Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Solid Waste and Sanitation

Oversight Hearing on Reducing Food Waste in New York City

June 7, 2016

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. The Citizens Budget Commission's (CBC's) mission is to achieve constructive change in the finances and services of New York State and New York City government. Since 2012, CBC has released a [number of reports](#) examining the cost and efficiency of New York City waste collection and disposal.

In February 2016, CBC released a report, titled [Can We Have Our Cake and Compost it Too?](#), that found the City's focus on organics diversion makes sense: food scraps and other organic material are the largest share of trash after recyclables, organic material creates harmful methane gas when landfilled, and alternative technologies for organics already exist. Organic waste accounts for around one-third of New York City's trash, and a large portion of this stream—60 percent of residential organic waste, or 600,000 tons annually, and 90 percent of commercial organic waste, about 672,000 tons annually—is food.

The City has two programs in place intended to reduce the volume of food waste. In August 2015 the Department of Sanitation (DSNY) required 350 large food waste generating businesses to arrange for their own organic material processing. These rules took effect at the beginning of this calendar year.

The DSNY is also addressing residential organic waste through its curbside organics pilot program, which is in effect in 10 neighborhoods. Over two years, nearly 16,000 tons of organic waste were diverted from landfills. However, there are two important challenges that inhibit expansion citywide: high cost and the lack of nearby processing capacity for organic material.

Right now the cost of the residential pilot program is small, about \$19 million over two years. However, if the curbside program were expanded citywide, costs would balloon to between \$177 million and \$250 million per year, mostly to pay for additional collection runs. We project that at least 88,000 new truck shifts would be needed each year under current collection practices.

Second, collections of organic material will quickly exceed capacity to process it. CBC's survey of composting facilities within 150 miles of Manhattan found available processing capacity to

accommodate just 10 percent of total NYC residential and commercial organic waste. Capacity constraints are even tighter for food waste as 3 of the 4 processing facilities outside the city limits are permitted to take only a small share of food waste compared to other organics like yard waste. These facilities have the capacity to process only 4.6 percent of NYC's total food waste (9.8 percent of the city's residential food waste). There are numerous anaerobic digestion developments in the works in the region, but they will also serve other municipalities and customers.

Until the City can address the high cost of residential garbage collection and secure adequate organics processing capacity, it should devise a more limited strategy. Two possibilities are:

- 1) Consider in-sink disposers in select neighborhoods with adequate wastewater treatment plant infrastructure. At the moment, 55 percent of NYC households are served by treatment plants with sufficient capacity to deal with food sludge. The Department of Environmental Protection and DSNY should collaborate to carefully study and identify neighborhoods where in-sink disposers could be used without burdening wastewater treatment infrastructure.
- 2) Expand curbside collections only where and when additional collection routes are not required. If participation levels are high enough, the DSNY could expand the curbside organics collection program while avoiding additional collection routes. This could be achieved by either replacing a weekly refuse pickup with an organics pickup or collecting refuse and organics simultaneously with special trucks with two separate compartments. Achieving such efficiencies would require City Council approval and a significant boost to participation rates.

Unless residential trash collection costs are reduced, new program costs will greatly overwhelm any potential savings from landfill reduction. A significant expansion of food waste collection may also outpace regional processing infrastructure. A targeted and thoughtful approach, including in-sink food waste disposers where viable, could be a way to preserve municipal resources and ensure food waste programs are sustainable for the long term.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Copies of the report are attached and available online at www.cbcny.org.