

Minutes of the Putnam County Residential Composting Task Force Meeting

September 6, 2024

The first meeting of the Putnam County Residential Composting Task Force was called to order at 10:02 a.m.

Members Present

In Person: Ilona Campo, Barbara Barosa, Joe Montuori, Vicki DiLonardo, Sean Bennett

Microsoft Teams: Jen Lerner, Shanna Siegel

1. **Welcome and Introductions (Members Present)**

- **Ilona Campo**, *Planning Assistant / Climate Smart Coordinator*, Putnam County Planning Department
- **Barbara Barosa**, *Commissioner of Planning*, Putnam County Planning Department
- **Sean Bennett**, *Planner*, Putnam County Planning Department
- **Vicki DiLonardo**, *Sr. Public Health Program Assistant / Recycling Coordinator*, Putnam County Health Department
- **Joe Montuori**, *Executive Director*, Sustainable Putnam
- **Jen Lerner**, *Senior Resource Educator*, Cornell Cooperative Extension
- **Shanna Siegel**, *Supervising Public Health Educator; Public Information Officer*, Putnam County Health Department

2. **Discuss: Program Goals**

- **Purpose:** Ilona explained that the purpose of the meeting was to explore options for residential composting. There are 8/62 counties already participating in an organic waste collection program of some sort, mostly in the form of yard waste. Model counties that have succeeded in these programs are Schenectady, Tompkins, and Westchester.
- **Circular Economy:** The idea is to encourage a circular economy/closed loop system (i.e. limit how far our resources and waste travel). There will be a Circular Economy Summit hosted by Sustainable Hudson Valley on 9/12/24 at SUNY Orange in Newburgh, NY. Ilona presented the [other events](#) taking place during Climate Solutions Week.
- **Participating Municipalities in Putnam:** At the moment, Philipstown is the only municipality within Putnam offering food scrap composting. Other towns that have expressed interest in these type of programs include Putnam Valley, Carmel, Kent, etc.
- **Target Population:** For community wide composting, the target population would be homeowners and renters only (not to include commercial, industrial, or institutional sources just yet).
- Barbara suggested taking a step back and starting composting at county facilities first or running the programs conjunctively.
- **Current Efforts:** Vicki mentioned that there is a compost bin at the Cornell Master Gardeners' Garden that could act as a model for other systems at the County level. When this effort was initiated years ago, it didn't really succeed because there was a lack of responsible personnel.
- Barbara asked where the ideal central location would be for a large scale compost pile, perhaps Tilly Foster? Vicki said the Health Dept. had previously envisioned composting on site at the different facilities (i.e. each campus would have their own bin or two). The current bins are their own self-contained systems only for fruit and vegetable scraps and education as to what can go into the bin is placed in employee lunchrooms.
- Jen mentioned that there is always an issue with the "brown" component of compost, 4x the amount of brown (carbon sources/yard) is needed to compliment the "green" (nitrogen sources/food) waste. Having a carbon source bin next to the compost bins would be a helpful

addition (supplied from the Parks Dept.). Paper scraps like shredded paper and cut up cardboard (plenty in an office environment) can also be a good source of carbon, but they will need to be contained so the wind doesn't carry them away. Historically, there has not been a lot of output from these "lazy" composting methods, Jen concurred that they only produce about two five-gallon buckets annually (which go back to the CCE garden), there is nothing to really distribute back to residents.

- The food scrap to compost turnaround time for the black bins that the Health Dept. utilizes and [sells](#) tends to be more than a few months. Sean asked who manages the bins, Jen answered there is somebody in the garden (either CCE staff/volunteers or Health Dept. employees) once a week who measures and adjusts moisture levels if needed.
- **Solid Waste Management Position:** Shanna mentioned that there was a recent approval from the Health Committee that will give the Health Dept. the opportunity to apply for the DEC grant that funds the full time, county-level Solid Waste/Recycling Coordinator position. She also said that the County as its own entity is a great way to pilot larger scale ideas for the communities, since the County campuses are spread out, this can act as a replica of what can be done on a larger scale in the community. Shanna has also vouched to the County Executive that this necessary position will have a lot of cross over between departments.
- **Preliminary Goals:** The group reached a consensus that it makes the most sense to start small with composting at county facilities. Ilona mentioned there are CSC grants available for pilot programs geared towards this type of project. Barbara asked if there were terms/specific requirements for grant funding (i.e. does every facility need to offer resident drop off as well). Ilona will look more into this. The initial goal will be to start with a pilot program at county facilities, then explore county-wide composting for residents to drop off their food scraps at designated locations/facilities.

3. **Discuss: Using Surrounding Towns/Counties as Models**

- **Tompkins/Schenectady/Westchester:** The counties already have a food scrap drop off at multiple facilities model in place. Westchester is unique with their [Inter Municipal Agreements \(IMA\)](#), in which the County itself contracts with a food scrap hauler and the municipalities have the option to buy into the program at a subsidized rate for their residents. Schenectady also offers annual yard waste drop off permits at \$25 for residents (\$30 for out-of-County). Considering the above, there can be a fundraising aspect of this if we choose so.
- **Tompkins Pilot Program:** Tompkins County also did a comprehensive curbside pickup [pilot program](#) that proved to be successful. This may be a useful pilot template or model to follow if we also want to consider curbside.
- **Philipstown:** Joe brought in an example of the food scrap bucket [starter kits](#) that Philipstown sells. Residents can bring their buckets to the Philipstown Recycling Center on Lane Gate Road or at Kemble Ave. in Cold Spring typically once per week. Philipstown has a designated time/day of the week that they collect the scraps. The comparative cost for a system like this would be buying starter kits in bulk then selling them at cost, and adding on the cost associated with the contracted pick up service. Philipstown did this as a pilot project where they signed up 100 residents for 6 months, after which the town re-assessed and determined that it was successful and decided to continue on a permanent basis.

4. **Discuss: Moving Forward**

- **Public Surveys:** Sustainable Putnam already solicits resident feedback from their short [surveys](#) at public events. So far, a couple hundred people from Carmel, Kent, Putnam Valley, and Patterson have expressed interest in community composting. Joe and Jen offered to help develop a more detailed survey that can be distributed via SP events/ mailing list, the CCE Live Healthy Coalition, CCE newsletters, Putnam Partners network, etc. Some questions can include what town they live in, what are people's barriers with backyard composting (ick factors,

raccoons, bears, etc.), what do people feel are the greatest health concerns in their community, what are people most likely to adopt, what do residents ultimately want, etc. Shanna said since the recent public health survey did not yield many results, perhaps a few hundred residents should be the goal. Surveys are a useful tool, but we will need to incentivize feedback in less formal ways and be careful with town/event specific responses and they're not reflective of the wants/needs of the entire Putnam community.

- **Curbside Composting:** From their independent studies, SP concluded that curbside pickup is more expensive and relies on widespread participation to be effective. Barbara made an important point that if we chose curbside pickup, it would likely have to go through the municipalities, which they may not want to do at this time, and it would be more difficult to implement county-wide. Shanna also brought up a valuable point that with the SWC position, who would be responsible for re-certifying the County's Solid Waste Management Plan (inclusive of the whole county), other municipalities would be able to apply for DEC grants just by participating in the Plan. She also noted we don't have to have a one size fits all approach and we shouldn't be creating additional barriers (especially transportation wise). We should encourage interested municipalities (like Putnam Valley) to explore available grants.
- Barbara also asked if this is something private haulers can offer, i.e. can you sign up for compost collection at the same time as solid waste hauling. In response, Joe mentioned that Curbside Compost (Ridgefield, CT) had a pickup program already in place for Brewster, but it wasn't profitable for them due to low participation rates. A lack of advertising and outreach could be some of the factors why it was not as successful. Regardless, Curbside Compost has expressed interest in partnering with the County for a larger scale project.
- **Contracting Waste Haulers:** Ilona mentioned that she spoke with John Tully, Director of Purchasing, who noted that there is no waste hauler that is on the state bid that also participates in compost hauling. It would likely have to be a new RFB process (lowest cost bidder) or shared services solicitation.
- **Incentives:** Shanna asked if there was any evidence of solid waste reduction, in terms of excluding food/yard waste, that could incentivize/encourage residents to participate. Ilona mentioned that the results from the Tompkins County pilot program ([link above](#)) also included resident testimonials for overall waste reduction. Shanna also reiterated that this kind of study could be a responsibility under the Solid Waste Coordinator position.
- Constant community messaging is key, outreach will have to continue through SP, Health Dept., and CCE's efforts.
- **Contamination:** Joe added that whenever SP talks to residents about drop-off food scrap recycling they love the idea of it and would like to participate, however, officials will need to keep an eye on contamination levels. Personnel that sell and distribute the bins also educate the buyers before handing them over and there's a sticker on top of the bin that is a detailed list reminding residents of what can and cannot go in. So far, there doesn't seem to be an issue with garbage/HHW contamination, Beacon doesn't have a problem with this either. Vicki made the point that those who want to drop off tend to do it the right way as opposed to curbside where people are less likely to comply with restricted items. Sean also made the point that there is the issue with refuse labeled "compostable", but it is actually a form of green washing. Beacon had to say no to these items for this reason. Joe added that there are special certifications to keep an eye on for these types of materials. This seems to be the benefit of contracting with a designated food scrap hauler who can transport it to an industrial facility that can accept more compostable items.
- **Compost Machines:** As an alternative to maintaining piles or contracting services, Ilona presented Columbia County's (and Stamford, CT) [EcoRich Food Waste Composter](#). The vendor's website provides [specs](#) for the different machines. A good cost estimate would be in the \$50,000 range. Jen suggested taking a field trip to visit one of the machines. Questions were raised as to where to put it, is it small enough to put on a facility site campus, is the finished

product actually compost or just dehydrated food scraps, do we need buy in from the DPW/Health Dept./Parks Dept., what are the running/maintenance costs, how much would the substrate cost, etc. Joe also mentioned the [ADK webinar](#) he attended that provided info, resources, and workshops on composting and released their free [plans](#) to build a community-scale composting machine. This brought back the original decision of if we want to manage the waste in house and break it down ourselves or if we want to solicit an organic waste hauler.

- **Timeline**: The next round of CSC Grant will not be available until 2025 (due end of July). Perhaps starting slow with a game plan for a pilot program would be the best place to start then apply for a grant to fund it.
- **Three Pile Method**: If we want to process the compost in house, Jen suggested to utilize the lazy composting method where there are three piles: feedstock pile (browns), compost pile (greens), and a finishing pile (final product). The design does not have to be expensive and can even be made out of inexpensive wooden pallets. It was discussed that the public should not have access to the bins/piles at the facilities as there tends to be an issue with garbage contamination. These bins/piles will need to be located behind the facilities or out of the public view.
- **Parks Dept. Supplying Brown Feedstock**: Can the Parks Dept. collect the landscaping waste separately? Yes, it may be easiest for them to drop it off in a bucket or bag. We will most definitely need to coordinate with the Parks Dept. Jen added that carbon feedstock is the hardest part, for example, you would need 20 garbage size bags of chopped leaves, fresh woodchips, etc. just to manage compost for the year. Cardboard and shredded office paper are also an excellent source. There can be an issue with ink contamination if the final product is going to be incorporated into an edible garden, therefore the final compost works best as a landscaping amendment and to encourage waste reduction.
- Barbara questioned what is being done at Tilly Foster Farm and if there could be an untapped potential there. Benefits to this location include being along Curbside Compost's route (easy pickup) and it's a central, public location. Other locations to consider are the golf course, Veterans' Memorial Park, airport park, DBS campus, etc.
- **Legal/Permits**: Law and Risk Departments will have to be involved in this endeavor. Will the public need to sign something before they drop off? We need to keep DEC permits approvals in mind for runoff into watershed/reservoirs. DEC seems to be supportive in promoting practices. Watershed Ag. Council key personnel: Jessica Alba (Watershed Forester), Tyler Van Fleet.
- **Long Term Goal**: Reduce our solid waste output and encourage a circular economy.

5. Other Business / Comments

- Continue meetings as collaborative effort, meet back within a month .
- Ilona and Barbara are coordinating a county-hosted, NYSERDA run training course on Lithium Battery Storage Laws geared towards town board members/personnel.
- SHV Climate Action Week: Circular Economy Summit.
- SP Repair Café 9/14, looking for volunteers.

6. Action Items

- Ask permission from CE first. Schedule a separate meeting with CE's office, Shanna, Dr. Nesheiwat, Barbara, and Ilona if need be.
- Develop a benefits/challenges/cost list for county presentation
- Reach out to other county departments to gauge interest in county facility composting and consider locations. Coordinate with DPW/Parks, make sure they're on board.
- Develop a survey to department heads. Example questions can include how many employees in your department, can you appoint a person within the dept. (name/title) to monitor input, would they rather compost at their facility or bring it elsewhere, where would you put the bin, etc.

- Coordinate with town officials and gauge interest. Do they want to develop their own programs or would they want to participate in the counties.
- Coordinate and develop a more detailed community survey and distribute it accordingly. Allow time for feedback.
- Research grant opportunities.
- Research statistics for solid waste reduction partnered with organic waste diversion.

Meeting adjourned at 11:19 a.m.

Next meeting scheduled for October 11, 2024 at 10am