



Creatively working with youth to achieve equitable zero-waste, climate smart school communities and a plastic free biosphere, —teaching citizen science, civic action, arts & media

Cafeteria Culture Testimony - June 15, 2020

New York City Council Hearing; Regarding Intros 1942 and 1943, the CORE Act

Good afternoon, Chairman Reynoso and members of the Sanitation and Solid Waste Committee.

On behalf of Cafeteria Culture (CafCu), I strongly urging the City Council to pass Intros 1942 and 1943, the CORE Act, to ensure that our City's residents can continue to engage in some form of organics recycling and composting by immediately restoring the \$7 million dollars of funding to our community-based compost drop-offs and education programs run by DSNY. CafCu is especially supportive of the bill's proposed plan for at least three accessible and equitably sited recycling drop off sites to be located in each community, including those who have been previously left out City recycling opportunities, ensuring the long overdue opportunity for public housing and lower income communities to participate in such programs close to home.

Cafeteria Culture (CafCu), founded as Styrofoam Out of Schools, is an environmental education organization that works with creatively youth to achieve equitable zero waste, climate smart school communities and a plastic free biosphere. Students in our programs, overwhelmingly from lower income communities of color and living in public housing, are providing an urgently needed voice to our City's zero waste and climate movement. Our award winning "Cafeteria Ranger" service learning programs and "Garbology 101", taught by our team to over 12,000 students in 20+ NYC schools and shared for free with all NYC schools, helped to launch and support the City's first school composting pilot programs. Students take on leadership roles during the lunch period and conduct waste audits and use their data to inform policy, bridging the connection between our consumption and garbage to environmental justice and climate change.

Organics Collection, Environmental Justice and Education

The Administration's decision to slash the DSNY budget, including cutting the \$28 million for composting organic waste and recycling education and outreach, is one giant step backwards in our efforts to mitigate the climate crisis. What we "save" now, will surely cost us dearly in the near future. The elimination of all forms of City supported organics collection translates into more garbage being transported to waste transfer stations in the South Bronx, North Brooklyn and Southeast Queens, as well as to the Covanta incinerator in Newark, NJ, all environmental justice communities, or "sacrifice zones," that are already disproportionately impacted by our City's garbage.

Local or community composting sites are ideal places to teach about the awe-inspiring beauty of the composting process, replacing the uninformed "yuk" reaction with revelatory awe. The Cafcu team has witnessed this stunning educational "aha" moment many times simply by taking students on walking field trips to community gardens. Kids and adults alike put their hands into finished compost, smell its lush earthiness (often for the first time), and behold the bounty of the garden. Every community deserves a composting site.

Our 10 years of experience on teaching about waste equity, researching local urban composting in Tokyo, and partnering with youth and schools on the piloting of innovative zero waste solutions has informed one of our core principles: the future of NYC solid waste management must include *local solutions for all*. **Ensuring that some of the local drop-off sites specified within the CORE Act also serve as sites that can locally process organics will bring us one step closer to this vision.**

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Long Term Consequences and Future Benefits

Budget cuts for citywide composting are short sighted and dangerous. **The long-term implications of such budget cuts will no doubt set the City way back on our hard earned progress towards zero waste, as well as sustainable behavioral changes for many of our City's residents.** We are still recovering from similar setbacks caused by the recycling cuts after 9/11. The climate crisis may soon overshadow the pandemic and we cannot risk another 20 year recovery period to rebuild the groundwork for a composting culture for ALL City residents.

Food scraps and organics account for roughly a third of our waste stream. Our rapidly rising price tag of almost 1/2 a billion tax dollars annually to export our garbage to (mostly) out-of-state incinerators and landfills is not disappearing. Over time, budget cuts to the organics collection can only drive this cost higher and more rapidly, while simultaneously increasing our City's greenhouse gas emissions.

Additionally, restoring and maintaining City Council funding for zero waste education and outreach at this time is critical. We must ensure that *all* New Yorkers, especially our children from lower income communities and communities of color are provided with educational opportunities that bridge the connection between food as garbage and the climate crisis. We have no time to waste.

We hope that the CORE Act is passed as soon as possible, setting the stage for the long term, climate smart solution of mandatory citywide composting for all City schools and residents, keeping food waste out of landfills and incinerators. Investing in recycling and organics collection with robust education and outreach to support these efforts is critical for curbing our City's carbon and methane emissions .

With the Coronavirus starkly highlighting our city's sacrifice zones, topped by the Trump administration's EPA rollbacks on air and climate pollution, we must do everything possible - right now - to end environmental and racial injustices in New York City, including how we manage our solid waste. Let's ensure the right to clean air and a healthy future for our most vulnerable children and communities.

A special thank you to Council Members Powers and Reynoso for listening to the community's outcry against the recent organics collection budget cuts and for your excellent leadership on this issue.

Thank you,
Debby Lee Cohen

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Photo: Fifth grade students from Cafeteria Culture's Zero Waste Schools Program at PS/MS 34 Franklin D Roosevelt trenching thier school food scraps at the 12th Street Children's Garden.

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