



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

Cafeteria Culture Testimony to:

**New York City Council and the New York City Office of Management and Budget
May 21, 2020**

Good afternoon,

Cafeteria Culture urges the City Council to ensure that the City's residents can continue to engage in some form of organics recycling and composting by immediately restoring the funding to our community-based composting programs. 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 very near future, negatively impacting the lives of our most vulnerable communities and all of our children.

Cafeteria Culture (CafCu), founded as Styrofoam Out of Schools, works with youth to creatively achieve zero waste, climate smart schools communities and a plastic free biosphere. We teach innovative environmental education that fosters youth-led solutions by merging citizen science, civic action, media and the arts. 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. **CafCu's unique partnerships with schools and student leadership opportunities in the cafeteria helped the City with the launching the first school composting pilot programs.**

The Mayor's proposed budget to cut funding for citywide composting is 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 ensuring a sustainable 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. In fact, these proposed budget cuts to the organics collection can only drive this cost higher and more rapidly, while simultaneously increasing our City's greenhouse gas emissions.

The cuts to the NYC Compost project and partners and to GrowNYC together, approximately \$7 million, allows New Yorkers to continue diverting food scraps, thus preventing a meaningful percentage of our City's waste stream from going to landfills, where it is destined to emit methane, a powerfully destructive greenhouse gas or to an incinerator in Newark NJ, that has negatively impacted that community for over 20 years.

The restoration of this funding, a very small percentage of the DSNY budget, would ensure that:

- At least eight non-profit organizations that rely on City-funding to provide organics collection and processing services, as well as community education will continue their waste reduction efforts;
- At least 170 food scrap drop-off sites across all five boroughs can continue to decrease methane emissions; and

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- At least six community composting facilities can continue their work of processing food scraps to invaluable compost that supports the growing of food locally in community gardens and urban farms during a time of food insecurity.

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, are able to bridge the connection between food as garbage and the climate crisis. We have no time to waste and hope the Council prioritizes this urgent need in the budget process.

Cafeteria Culture also requests that the Council restore and *increase* funding for residential and school organics collections, the next step to be focused on passing the CORE Act, introduced last week by Council Members Antonio Reynoso and Keith Powers. **This should be followed by the long term, climate smart solution of mandating citywide composting, allowing us to reap the full benefits of an organics collection program that will provide a source of income to the city while benefiting our city for future generations.**

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 their school food scraps at the 12th Street Children's Garden.

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