

TOWNSHIP OF LOWER MERION

Finance Committee

Issue Briefing

Topic: Award of a Contract for Residential Curbside Collection of Organic Food Waste for Composting Pilot Program

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I. Action To Be Considered By The Board:

Award a contract for a pilot Residential Curbside Collection of Organic Food Waste for Composting Program.

II. Why This Issue Requires Board Consideration:

Contracts of this scope must be awarded by the Board of Commissioners.

III. Current Policy Or Practice (If Applicable):

The Board of Commissioners received the Township's first Sustainability Plan on June 7, 2023 (www.lowermerion.org/SustainPlan). Strategy WM2 of the Sustainability Plan, Compost Program, recommends that the Township pilot an organic food waste compost program for Township residents.

Residential food waste is currently included in household refuse, which is picked up curbside, once a week by the Township, and ultimately delivered to the Covanta waste-to-energy facility in Conshohocken. Presently, the Township collects residential yard waste for composting but does not and cannot collect food waste for composting due to state regulations and operational limitations. Some households independently employ the services of third-party vendors for bi-weekly food waste pickup and composting.

IV. Other Relevant Background Information:

In 2024, the Township initiated a pilot community compost drop-off program wherein enrolled participants were able to bring their food waste to designated outdoor collection receptacles located at select Township facilities. The receptacles are serviced weekly by a local third-party service provider that is permitted by the Commonwealth and possesses access to a state-licensed food waste composting facility in nearby Delaware County. The program started at two locations, but was expanded in 2025 due to demand and is currently operating at five Township facilities, providing a residential food waste composting option for up to a total of 200 households.

Curbside Composting Pilot Program

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that up to 50% of household refuse is made up of waste that can be composted, and reports that food is the single largest category of material sent to municipal solid waste landfills. Lower Merion's refuse is sent to a waste-to-energy facility rather than a landfill, allowing for energy to be generated from incineration. However, due to the high water content of food waste in general, the presence of food waste in household refuse can make burning waste inefficient and costly. Additionally, when waste is incinerated there is an environmental impact that could be avoided.

The existing pilot community compost drop-off program is currently operating in five locations in the Township and serves 160 households. An additional 185 households are currently on a waitlist, including approximately 115 in the Bala Cynwyd section of the Township. The proposed curbside pilot would consist of weekly pickups of residential food waste for up to 100 residential households by a third-party vendor, contracted by the Township. The goal of the pilot program is to gather data and experience with collecting food waste as a separate waste stream, directly from the household where waste is generated. The following information would be gathered from the program:

- Participation rates
- Quantity of waste diverted
- Costs and savings
- Contamination rates
- Operational feasibility
- Communication needs and challenges

The pilot is to be offered to households situated along a single refuse collection route in Bala Cynwyd, located southeast of the Bala Cynwyd Library. This pilot area contains approximately 250 households that share the same refuse pickup day. Food waste pickup would occur on the same day as refuse pickup, which would simplify data collection, limit truck activity in the neighborhood, reduce concerns over pests and aesthetics, and increase ease of participation. Implementing the pilot program in one neighborhood, and this neighborhood in particular, addresses several program priorities including meeting demand for Township-supported composting in Bala Cynwyd, keeping pilot costs within budget by concentrating the program in a high-density area, increasing the feasibility of data collection, and maximizing the usefulness of the data collected by allowing a direct comparison with refuse collection data. Households within the pilot program area would be given the option to opt-in to the pilot. Based on industry data, 50-100 households are expected to opt-in. Once enrolled, households would receive information on how to participate along with a labeled receptacle in which to place their food waste at the curb. The pilot program would be offered at no cost to the participating households.

Bid Information

A Request for Proposals (RFP) was issued on July 1, 2025, with five residential organic waste collection companies in the area receiving the RFP. The Scope of Services in the RFP included procurement and distribution to program participants of collection bins, weekly curbside collection of residential organic food waste, delivery of collected organic food waste to a PADEP permitted/licensed organic food waste composting facility, managing participant enrollment on a

rolling basis, educating and regularly communicating with program participants, and reporting collected volumes to Township staff.

The lowest of the two bids received, a proposal submitted by Mother Compost in partnership with Bennet Compost, included a price point of \$21 per month, per enrolled household, plus a one-time \$15 charge per participating household for the collection bin. By comparison, the other bid received from Circle Compost featured a cost of \$29 per month, per enrolled household. Retail curbside compost program rates range from \$23-30 per month for every-other-week service, which suggests that the low bid price received by the Township is a competitive figure below market or retail value.

If the contract is awarded, the pilot would launch on or around November 1, 2025 and last through October 31, 2026 using budgeted 2025 funds and funding proposed in the 2026 budget. This tentative pilot calendar would provide the Township with one year of data that could then be analyzed and used to inform future programming and operational decisions around food waste composting in the Township.

V. Impact On Township Finances:

Based on the bids received, the total cost for offering this pilot program would be \$26,700, with a cost of \$5,700 incurred in 2025 and \$21,000 incurred in 2026 assuming enrollment of 100 households along the selected route starting November 1, 2025. The 2025 costs are well below the amount budgeted of \$55,497, primarily due to not being awarded a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) grant for an expanded version of this pilot. The 2026 costs are included in the proposed 2026 budget request that the Board of Commissioners will consider this fall.

If authorized, this pilot program cost would be offset in part by the diversion of organic food waste from the refuse stream and avoided refuse disposal tipping fees.

VI. Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends awarding a contract to Mother Compost in partnership with Bennet Compost for the pilot residential curbside collection of organic food waste for composting program in the selected program area.