



# ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

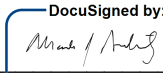
### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Arlington County  
Program Title: Residential Food Scraps Collection Program  
Program Category: Environmental

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Mark Schwartz  
Title: County Manager  
Signature: 

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Arlington County Residential Curbside Food Scraps Collection Program

Executive Summary/Program Overview:

In September 2021, Arlington County began collecting food scraps as part of its residential curbside trash, recycling and organics collection program. The Residential Curbside Food Scraps Collection program (“Food Scraps Program”) was created to give residents an alternative to incinerating food waste and to allow Arlington County to make progress towards its sustainability and waste diversion goals.

With the launch of the Food Scraps Program, Arlington County became the first county in the Commonwealth to implement curbside food scraps collection as part of its standard curbside service. The program has been successful and well received, as revealed by a March 2022 Food Scraps Program survey of the community. The survey indicated that 79% of respondents were participating in the program. Additionally, internal waste audits indicate approximately 27% of the food waste in the single-family residential waste stream is now being diverted from incineration to composting. We expect this percentage to continue to increase as the program matures. The Food Scraps Program has been a major step forward in the County’s efforts to increase its recycling and waste diversion rate.

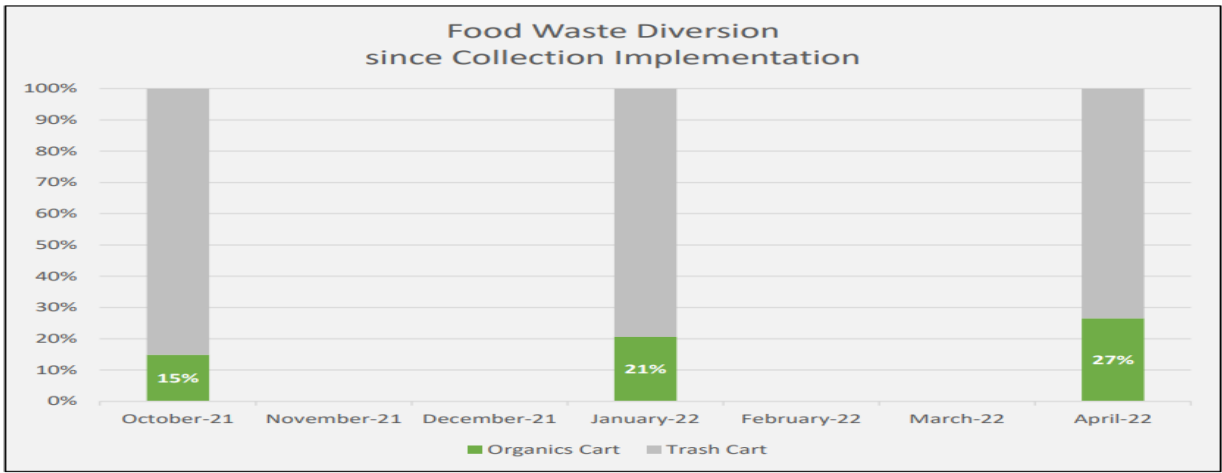


Figure 1. According to internal waste audits conducted by the SWB, the percentage of food waste diverted away from incineration has grown from 15 percent in October 2021 to 27 percent in April 2022.

**Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality:**

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), approximately 31% of the overall food supply is wasted every year in the United States. Besides impacts on food security and resource conservation, food waste accounts for approximately 18% of total U.S. methane emissions that come from landfills. **Methane is a potent greenhouse gas with 27-30 times the global warming potential compared to Carbon Dioxide.** Diverting food waste from landfills can, therefore, lessen the impact of climate change as well as conserve and reuse organic resources.

In Arlington, approximately 20% of the single-family residential waste stream consists of food waste. This is a substantial portion of the waste stream with the potential to be diverted from incineration at Covanta's Alexandria/Arlington Waste-to-Energy Facility and turned into compost. Diverting these materials from the trash presents a significant opportunity for Arlington to advance its waste reduction goals.

In November 2015, the Arlington County Board adopted a zero-waste resolution aimed at increasing waste diversion to at least 90% by 2038 for Arlington County as a whole. The Arlington County Department of Environmental Services - Solid Waste Bureau ("SWB") has been tasked with developing and administering the programs to achieve this goal. These efforts to date have been guided by the County's Solid Waste Management Plan ("SWMP"). The current SWMP, adopted in 2004, includes curbside food scrap collection as a program addition. The implementation of the Food Scraps Program in September 2021 fulfilled this aspect of the SWMP.

**How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria**

Arlington's Food Scraps Program offers an innovative way for other Virginia Communities to divert a significant portion of the residential waste stream. As the first locality in Virginia to offer this program to all of its single-family residential customers as part of their standard curbside service,

Arlington has created a replicable model for other communities to follow for curbside food scraps collection. Arlington's curbside collection system is very similar in structure to others throughout the state, providing many communities with a base upon which to build and replicate Arlington's success. The changes to Arlington's curbside collection system to accommodate the addition of food scraps were relatively minor. Most of the effort to successfully implement this program consisted of education and outreach, which can be easily undertaken by most communities.

Additionally, the success of the program was dependent on cooperation with a public-private partnership in a nearby jurisdiction. The primary impediment to beginning the curbside collection of food scraps prior to September 2021 was the lack of a facility capable of composting a mixture of yard waste and food waste ("mixed organics"). A facility capable of processing mixed organics opened in Prince William County in September 2020. This facility, a public-private partnership between Prince William County and Freestate Farms, LLC, was the final element necessary for Arlington County to begin offering curbside food scraps collection service. Close coordination between Arlington County, Prince William County, and Freestate Farms was critical to ensuring a smooth launch to the program.

**How the program was carried out, including financing and staffing, and program's results.**

The SWB, through a contracted hauler, provides curbside solid waste and recycling collection services to all single-family residences in Arlington. The contracted hauler only provides collection services. Arlington has separate contractual agreements with a waste-to-energy facility (Materials Recovery Facility) and a composting facility (Freestate Farms). Arlington County utilizes a three-cart curbside collection system. Single-family households separate materials into three carts depending on what they are disposing: a blue cart for single stream recycling (mixed paper, plastics, and aluminum/steel cans); a green cart for organics (yard waste/trimmings, food scraps); and a black cart for trash.

During contract negotiations with Arlington's curbside collection hauler in 2014, Arlington envisioned adding yard waste collection and, eventually, food scraps collection, consistent with the County's 2004 SWMP. Accordingly, the contract included options for the addition of curbside yard waste collection (which the County exercised in 2016) and food scraps collection. The contract option for the collection of food scraps stipulated that food scraps would be placed in the same cart as yard waste, creating a cart of "mixed organics" for composting.

The primary impediment to exercising the food scraps collection option in the contract was the lack of a composting facility in the region that could process "mixed organics" (yard trimmings and food scraps together). Although such a facility had been in development in Prince William County since 2015, that facility did not become operational until September 2020. Once this facility became operational, the County secured access to the facility and exercised the option in the collection contract for the collection of food scraps to begin in September 2021. Finished compost from Freestate Farms is made available free of charge to Arlington residents.

The financial impact of adding food scraps collection to the curbside program was quite reasonable. There was a small increase in the contractual cost of collection services associated with exercising the food scraps collection option. Additionally, certain internal operational changes and the one-time expense of educational and promotional materials for the Food Scraps Program added to the programmatic costs. In total, the cost of adding curbside food scraps collection was approximately \$12 per household for the first year of the program. However, due to other savings in the curbside collection program, Arlington customers saw a net *decrease* in their solid waste rate of nearly a dollar. With the subtraction of the one-time educational and promotional costs which were recovered in the first year of the program, the ongoing cost of the program to residents will be less than \$10 per household annually. This annual cost compares very favorably to the cost of purchasing similar services from a private food scraps collection and composting entity which is approximately \$385 annually.

To support the rollout of this new program, the SWB spent considerable time educating households on the program. The County used a variety of outreach methods including community town halls, booths at events (farmers markets, etc.), multimedia, e-mails, paper mailings, and social media platforms. Additionally, the SWB made a considerable number of resources available on its [website](#). The online resources include videos explaining the new program including what can and cannot be collected as food scraps as well as a written FAQ section. The SWB also updated the [“Where Does It Go?”](#) search feature on the County’s website to reflect the addition of curbside food scraps collection.

To further promote the program and facilitate resident participation, in the weeks leading up to the program start date, SWB staff distributed a “food scraps collection starter kit” consisting of a welcome letter, a guide to using the new collection service, a 2.5-gallon kitchen container to collect food scraps in the kitchen (facilitating collection of food scraps at the point of generation), a small roll of compostable bags, and a sticker to easily identify what can and cannot be composted. These starter kits were delivered by hand to all 33,211 single-family households in Arlington County.

The new program allows single family households to place food scraps into their green organics cart loose or in paper or other certified compostable bags (e.g., 3-gallon bags) that have been approved by the Biodegradable Products Institute or the Compost Manufacturing Alliance.



Figure 2Left: Arlington County SWB staff hand out food scraps collection caddies at Rock-n-Recycling in September 2021 (Image source ABC News 7); Center: The three-cart system for waste collection utilized by Arlington County; Right: The Food Scraps Program starter kit.

The program provides many benefits to the community and advances several Arlington County initiatives. First, the program highlights each of our roles in reducing food waste and promoting healthy soils. This awareness will, hopefully, lead to behavior change that benefits both individuals and the larger community. Going forward, continuing educational efforts will focus on preventing food waste, which could save many households money. Other benefits include, learning to make better use of leftovers and minimizing spoilage by storing refrigerated and perishable items properly.

Second, the Food Scraps Program supports the County's zero waste goal of diverting up to 90% of the County's waste from landfill or incineration by 2038. Food scraps make up over 20% of the residential waste stream according to Arlington's internal quarterly waste audits. According to the EPA, food waste is the largest category of what Americans throw out each day. By creating an easily accessible means of composting food waste, Arlington has implemented a key aspect of its waste diversion strategies.

Third, with the food scrap collection program, residents are not only increasing the County's recycling rate, reducing the amount of trash landfilled or incinerated, and creating soil amendments, they are reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Organic material in landfills is a big contributor to climate change.<sup>1</sup> When organic material in landfills breaks down, it releases large amounts of methane, a highly potent greenhouse gas.

The implementation of the Food Scraps Program provides a platform to increase awareness of each of our roles in reducing food waste, the financial costs of wasting food and promoting environmental benefits. Since the start of the program, the SWB has seen a consistent increase in the amount of food waste being diverted from incineration to composting. Staff anticipate that diversion will continue to grow and take approximately two years to modify community habits and maximize household participation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials#Landfilling>

**Brief Overview (Used for press releases, brochures, etc.):**

Arlington County's trailblazing residential food scrap collection program bolsters sustainability by diverting biodegradable waste from incineration to composting. Arlington's year-round curbside yard waste collection began in 2016. Five years later, the County expanded green cart pickup contents to include food scraps, which range from the remnants of fruits and vegetables to that of dairy and meats, bones included. Even greasy pizza boxes and paper napkins qualify. Collected along with yard trimmings placed in the green cart, either in compostable bags or even loose.

The implementation of a food scraps collection program provides the platform to increase awareness for reducing food waste and promoting healthy soils. Other benefits include making better use of leftovers, minimizing spoilage by storing refrigerated and perishable items properly and highlighting everyone's role in reducing food waste both inside and outside the home.

According to the EPA, some of the many benefits of reducing wasted food include:

- **Reduces methane emissions** from landfills and lowers your carbon footprint.
- **Conserves energy and resources**, preventing pollution involved in the growing, manufacturing, transporting, and selling food (not to mention hauling the food waste and then landfilling it).
- **Supports the community** by providing donated untouched food that would have otherwise gone to waste to those who might not have a steady food supply.

This effort supports the County's zero waste goal of diverting up to 90% of our waste from incineration by 2038. Before September 2021, food scraps made up over 20% of the residential waste stream according to Arlington's internal quarterly waste audits. With the food scrap collection program, residents are increasing the County's recycling rate, reducing the amount of trash incinerated, creating soil amendments, and depending on individual actions, saving money, reducing food waste, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This program is also consistent and supported by the County's overall Solid Waste Management Plan, submitted and approved by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality.