

## **Compost NOW: Community Composting in New Orleans**

### **Project Summary:**

Compost NOW (New Orleans Waste) began in 2017 with a mission to empower local residents to take collective action over the issue of food waste. Together, we have diverted over 600,000 pounds from the landfill through our free food waste collection program.

In 2020, Compost NOW developed their direct-to-farm/community garden composting program to continue to collect food scraps in multiple locations, after library-based collections were closed due to COVID-19. The new operation model has become a very popular site design, allowing food waste to be collected and processed in the same location, reducing "food waste miles" even further than our initial decentralized model.

Throughout 2020-2021, we have grown to coordinate nine residential compost collection sites in different neighborhoods throughout the city (plus additional public sites like City Park, Audubon Park, Green Project and more) where residents, during select hours and days, can drop off food scraps. And we added more sites in 2022.

Collections also connect new people to their local gardens, allowing them to reach a wider audience. At these sites, Compost NOW helps build the compost and supplies bins, signage, promotion, and a two-hour monthly volunteer shift. The resulting compost is used to enrich garden soil or given to community members. Part of the programming is the development of Compost NOW volunteering shifts where participants learn about the composting process as well as its connection and application to gardening. Our community garden sites form a cohesive network of compost infrastructure that works to mitigate landfilled waste in a decentralized, closed loop model. Community garden sites are widely successful, collecting 1,500-2,000 pounds of food scraps per week.

### **Project Description:**

The direct-to-farm/community garden composting program started as a temporary solution during COVID, but has since grown to become our most popular site design. As the only reliable compost drop-off site in New Orleans, we worked steadfastly to develop sites around the city, on both sides of the Mississippi and New Orleans East, and ensure our programming is accessible and crosses socioeconomic lines. Prior to 2021, most of our sites collected food scraps during an hour and a half window, and then transported to a nearby farm. The new program helps community gardens begin the composting process, so food scraps can be processed on-site into compost and then used in the garden in 3-6 months. Unlike previous sites, most of our community garden sites are unhosted, so volunteer shifts instead are used to help with food scrap processing. Our staff works with gardens to arrange volunteer shifts and provide continued assistance. The garden sites create a system that is more self-sustaining, involving little transport of heavy organic matter and resulting compost.

The program also offers more flexible collection hours. We also wanted to connect local residents with gardens in their area to both bring awareness to local movements for food sovereignty and security and increase community involvement with garden sites. Through our social media, we reach an audience of around 3,000 (tending to skew more female) where people can learn about our community garden partners, our site design, composting information, and other programming. Working with community gardens has developed additional exciting programs, including opportunities for volunteers and participants to harvest fresh produce from certain gardens, like Enchanted Yam Garden and the Broadmoor Food Pantry Garden.

The project is facilitated by Compost NOW founder Lynne Serpe (a volunteer herself) plus dozens of other volunteers and, since 2020, a part-time Compost NOW Assistant. And, of course, the partnerships formed with gardens, farms and compost haulers across the city.

In 2021, we worked with gardens, community members, and farms to improve our model and opened five new sites. We opened additional sites in Spring 2022 and another new site will be starting soon, on September 7th. We rely heavily on the support of volunteers, who help process compost at garden sites. Volunteers also "host" the collections at our public sites.

The community garden based composting sites have allowed us to expand, despite our limited funding and staffing, and involve a wider audience of both volunteers and participants. With the new model, developed in 2021, we were able to expand further in 2021 and 2022, and ultimately, divert more food scraps.

### **Environmental Improvements/Risk Reduction:**

Compost NOW's community garden based programming diverts food waste and produces fertile soil and compost, which have far reaching impacts on our environment and the people that live there. New Orleans is a city that generates an estimated 570,000 pounds of organic materials per day, most of which decomposes anaerobically in landfills. The trash, composed of around 40% organic materials, is responsible for significant environmental degradation which has pronounced impacts on those living in close proximity. By working with community organizations from neighborhoods across the city, we prevent food scraps from entering the landfill and releasing potent greenhouse gasses. By using a decentralized model, we further reduce greenhouse gasses from waste transport miles, and instead, build compost and soil that sequesters carbon.

The compost and soil produced by our community gardens is used in the same location it is created. In New Orleans especially, the acquisition of soil and compost, both in cost and movement, is a significant barrier to operating gardens. High levels of contamination, including dangerous heavy metals such as lead and arsenic, are found in New Orleans, thus, gardens have to either use raised beds or dig out and replace large amounts of soil. Our compost collections produce soil at gardens where it can be immediately used for garden operation. Raised beds can be filled with compost, where it is scientifically proven to augment plant growth

by introducing beneficial nutrients and microorganisms to the soil ecosystem. Compost Tea on foliar tissue (leaves) also protects against pathogens and pests, improving crop yield and reducing the amount of produce that is thrown away due to damage. We measure the amount of food waste collected by volume as well as number of new volunteers.

Lastly, our model works to empower community members to take collective action over the issue of food waste. By visiting the sites where compost is processed, participants and garden volunteers see the direct connection between food waste and growing food. Composting can seem like a formidable and smelly process, however, at these sites, we show that the natural cycles responsible for organic waste decomposition are quite easy to understand and tap into. The sites break down the barriers to composting, and our volunteer shifts offer opportunities to further explore the composting process and learn about the applications to gardening. Participants report feeling empowered in their ability to create change in their communities.

### **Other:**

New Orleans has yet to develop reliable waste transportation infrastructure, despite the growing recognition for organic waste processing in large cities. Our program brings awareness to the issue of food waste and soil degradation and builds support to develop an official composting program for the city.

### **Project Innovations & Sustainability:**

The composting infrastructure put in place at community gardens can continue to exist, even without the support of Compost NOW. The other composting drop-off sites and transportation networks require a small amount of funding, supplied by our annual donations.

In 2020-2021, we also supplied the tools (compost bins and worm bins) and information for individuals to compost at home, creating hundreds of small, DIY self-sustaining, composting operations that require no additional funding – and further reducing "food waste miles."

Compost NOW participants and supporters care about composting, and it is the genuine love and need for the program and mission that ensures its continuation, even with limited to no funds.

### **Transferability:**

Compost NOW's model of operation is based on a similar composting collection program through the Queens Public Library System, created by our founder, Lynne Serpe, and similar food-waste drop-off models are used in other cities. The model we use is applicable anywhere, especially those with limited composting infrastructure. Our program relies on small, decentralized locations to process food waste, and thus, requires smaller amounts of land than traditional organic waste management operations.

**Waste Management Hierarchy:**

Compost NOW works at the composting section of the Waste Management Hierarchy. At applicable farms, like Sugar Roots Farm, food scraps are first fed to farm animals. We reduce the amount of landfilled waste through the compost process and produce nutrient rich soil. Recognizing the importance of source reduction, our program advertises and connects community gardens with nearby residents to harvest produce, reducing waste at community gardens. We also publish resources on source reduction via our social media.