



Delaware business: Composting venture attracts investment, plans to expand

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The real job is strictly undercover at the 27-acre Wilmington Organic Recycling Center near the city's Southbridge section, a place where dozens of long, high, fabric-sheathed mounds obscure a novel bit of factory-scale, organic magic.

In a venture that has attracted interest -- and money -- from the nation's largest waste-management company, Peninsula Compost is taking in some 400 tons of food waste daily from as far away as New York City, mixing the mess and tucking it under blankets made of a high-tech membrane from W.L. Gore & Associates.

The covering material keeps rainwater out and traps odors inside, but still releases moisture rising from 165-foot-long heaps of carefully shredded mixtures of food and carbon-rich materials like paper and yard waste. Drains, blowers, and temperature and oxygen sensors maintain a round-the-clock decomposition party for the right mix of hungry bacteria, converting the heaps of waste into high-grade compost in just eight weeks.

Results over the first 18 months have been so promising that Texas-based Waste Management Inc. last week announced a "strategic investment" in the operation. Waste Management collects, manages, recycles and landfills wastes across North America, but until last week had nothing in the eastern United States to match Peninsula's operation.

"What this represents is really an affirmation that organics separation and recycling is now mainstream," said Nelson Widell, one of the principals of Peninsula Compost Group LLC, one of the owners of the \$20 million Wilmington Organic Recycling Center. "It reinforces the concept that we started with almost five years ago, when we announced that we intended to build this plant."

Widell did not disclose the size of Waste Management's investment, but did say that WORC's local owners, including Peninsula, EDiS and Port Contractors, retain control. Peninsula already has a proposal in the works for a similar plant in Freeport, Mass., and is considering projects in northern New Jersey and Baltimore.

Food-waste sources in Delaware and nearby areas, ranging from the Port of Wilmington to restaurants and institutions, are expected to keep the Wilmington operation busy.

"We operate in the mid-Atlantic area and it kind of fits nicely with our service offerings in this area, which is a growing area," said Lisa Kardell, spokeswoman for Waste Management. "It's a sensible option, and a lot of our customers are requesting additional options, so this gives us an opportunity to provide that."

Waste Management already has its own composting and bagging operations elsewhere in the country, and recently purchased a controlling interest in Garrick LLC, a fully integrated producer of organic lawn and garden products.

Until now, WORC's compost output has been distributed by truckloads, with some custom-blended with sand and gravel for use as a soil amendment and substitute.

The Wilmington site along Christiana Avenue has a capacity of 600 tons a day and 160,000 tons a year. Widell said operations started slowly after the opening in late 2009, as suppliers were "educated and re-educated" about the need to keep contaminants, such as plastic bags and glass, out of the food wastes. The Environmental Protection Agency recently recognized Peninsula for its new partnership with Philabundance, a nonprofit that provides food to the needy.

The operation chose Peninsula to take its unusable foods, becoming in the process a member of the EPA's efforts to promote nonpolluting "sustainable" [businesses](#).

Federal officials say composting the nation's millions of tons of food waste each year can save space in landfills, reduce emissions of landfill gases implicated in rising global temperatures, and return valuable nutrients to soil.

Neighbors of the plant are largely supportive as well.

Peninsula signed a "community benefits agreement" with Wilmington leaders before construction, and made a point of hiring local residents for both construction and operations. "That agreement really came out of their initial dismay and concerns and fears about what we were planning," Widell said.

Although some residents said they occasionally notice odors, none singled out the Wilmington compost site as a specific source among the many industrial activities in and around the Port of Wilmington and nearby Cherry Island Landfill.

"They have been an excellent neighbor," said Southbridge resident and community activist Marlene Dryden. "I wish we could say that about all the neighbors."