



[Waste Management investing in food-waste composting](#)

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Food-waste composting, largely associated with latter-day hippies and extreme greenies, got a major boost Tuesday when trash-industry behemoth Waste Management Inc. announced it was investing in a company that owns an industrial-size composting facility in Wilmington.

No amount was disclosed, other than that the company is not taking a controlling share. But just the fact of the investment thrilled recycling advocates.

"If there's any sign that the world's about to go through a major shift in trash, there it is," said Maurice Sampson II, who owns Niche Recycling Inc., a Philadelphia company that works with commercial customers that generate food waste.

"Whenever you see the largest player in the industry" making an investment like this, "it is significant," said Rocco D'Antonio, president of a similar New Jersey company, Organic Diversion L.L.C. For now, this kind of large-scale food-waste recycling is the realm of large institutions such as colleges, hospitals, restaurants, supermarkets, and food processors.

But regional advocates say that with interest in food-waste recycling booming and the cachet that Waste Management brings, curbside collection and recycling of food waste for residential customers cannot be far behind.

The Wilmington Organic Recycling Center is a \$20 million, 27-acre operation that opened in November 2009 and is owned by Peninsula Compost Co. L.L.C.

It is permitted to accept 600 tons of food waste and other organic material a day. Amounts have grown steadily, said marketing director and cofounder Nelson Widell. Last week, the facility hit 400 tons a day three days in a row, although the longer-term average has been 250 to 300 tons a day.

Among those sending food waste there are Villanova University, the University of Pennsylvania, Philabundance, Applebee's, Wawa Inc., and Whole Foods.

Widell said Waste Management was "the perfect partner to have. . . . They're going to be able to take it over the top and help us fill that plant up."

Based in Houston, Waste Management also owns a massive complex in Bucks County that includes two landfills, a yard-waste composting facility, a waste-to-energy plant, and an array of solar panels. Last month, the company opened a \$20 million sorting facility for curbside recyclables - glass, plastic, cans, paper, and the like - in Northeast Philadelphia.

Waste Management is moving from waste disposal to materials management. It has announced a goal of tripling its recycling activity - which would include composting - by 2020.

The United States generates about 34 tons of food waste a year - 14 percent of the municipal waste stream. Only about 2.5 percent of it is composted and turned into a resource. The rest is put in landfills, where it putrefies and produces methane, a greenhouse gas.

Peninsula charges \$42 to \$45 per ton of waste. Landfill fees in the region range from about \$65 to \$125 a ton.

The decomposition process is completed in about eight weeks, and the resulting nutrient-rich compost and mulch is sold in bulk to nurseries and used in various projects, including the landscaped area at the Philadelphia Union soccer facility in Chester and the site of a prison that was torn down in Camden. Regionally, interest in food-waste composting is thriving, experts say.

A year ago, Lee Meinicke, owner of Philly Compost Inc., had about 10 customers. She picked up their food waste in her truck and transported it to Ned Foley's Two Particular Acres farm in Royersford, Montgomery County.

Today, she has 24 customers, ranging from coffee shops to the Four Seasons Hotel. She just signed an agreement to take the food waste of Temple University Hospital's Episcopal Campus, a mental-health facility, and then return the compost to be made into an herb garden the patients will tend. With all the interest, Niche Recycling's Sampson and others say they think curbside food-waste recycling cannot be far behind - even in Philadelphia, which among major cities came late to recycling but has been increasing its diversion rates significantly in recent years.

"Right now, there is such an undertone in the city of people wanting to do this," Sampson said of food-waste recycling. "It's really percolating."