

Hartford Courant

West Hartford Launches Curbside Food Waste Recycling Program



By [Gregory B. Hladky](#) • [Contact Reporter](#)

About 130 [West Hartford](#) homeowners are taking part in a 15-week experiment to see if average families can help change the depressing statistic that more than 20 percent of all American trash is food waste that is thrown out and burned or buried.

Participating residents are separating the coffee grounds, bones, egg shells, cooking oils, old pasta, stale bread and all the other organic food waste they would normally throw out as garbage. They put it in an odor-resistant, dishwasher-safe kitchen “caddies,” and dump that into special brown bins that are taken to the curb every Thursday.

A garbage truck then picks up the food waste and transports it to a [recycling center in South-ington](#) that turns the organic garbage into methane and the methane into electricity.



Jose Soto picks up curbside food waste in a recycling program being tried out in West Hartford. One hundred and thirty volunteer homeowners are taking part in a 15-week experiment, from September to January. (Lauren Schneiderman / Hartford Courant)

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If this new-wave recycling system can be made to work in West Hartford, it might provide a model that could be used in municipalities all across Connecticut. The trouble is that a similar test carried out two years ago in Bridgewater never quite worked out the way organizers hoped.

West Hartford officials are taking a cautious approach to the food waste recycling experiment that was launched Oct. 5. “It’s just a test program,” said John Phillips, the city’s public works director.

“It’s an ambitious venture,” Phillips said. “It’s going to take a willing heart.”

Phillips said he is definitely worried that the same old-school attitudes that caused problems for Bridgewater’s food waste recycling effort could be replicated in West Hartford.

“When it comes to garbage, people want to throw it all in one pile and have it go away for free,” Phillips said. “People get offended when you say they have to pay for it.”

This new trial is a combined effort involving the city; the food-waste-to-energy operation in Southington, Quantum Biopower; West Hartford’s waste contractor, Covanta; and the garbage hauling company, Paines, Inc. For this preliminary test, all the equipment, transportation and recycling are being paid for by the three companies at no charge to participants or the city.

“We’ve been preparing for it for the last few months,” Phillips said of the test program that is currently scheduled to run through Jan. 4, 2018.

The volunteer homeowners were recruited from a few blocks bounded by Mountain Road, South Main Street, Sedgewick and Fern Streets, Phillips said, explaining the area was chosen to make the food waste pick up as simple as possible.

Comparable food-waste recycling programs are now being used in cities all over the U.S., from Portland, Ore., to New York City. In fact, Quantum Biopower is already receiving some food waste being collected for [recycling in New York City](#).

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Experts estimate that Connecticut produces more than 500,000 tons of organic waste each year, according to a 2015 study. The state has set a target of a 60 percent reduction in the overall amount of disposed trash by 2024, and food waste is considered the heaviest single component of that waste stream.

The issue is also linked to environmental pollution, energy waste and overuse of water resources.

Pesticides and herbicides used on food crops that are never actually eaten can damage the environment. Fuel burned to transport food that gets wasted adds to pollution and energy problems. Experts say more than 20 percent of fresh water used in agriculture goes for food that ends up being thrown away. More water is used to flush food waste into garbage disposals, and the ground-up waste ends up flowing into streams and rivers and eventually into Long Island Sound, where it helps damage the marine ecology. Food waste also contributes to the amount of trash being incinerated or ends up filling our dumps, adding to greenhouse gases and other environmental problems.

[Bio-recycling of organic waste](#) to produce energy and compost that can be used for fertilizer has been called “the next revolution” in the recycling industry.

“I think you’re going to see more towns exploring this,” said Chris Nelson, a supervising environmental analyst at the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

South Windsor town officials recently started looking into the possibilities for food waste recycling in their community. “West Hartford is not alone in this,” Phillips said.

He and other officials add that the key unknown is how much effort homeowners are willing to put into food recycling. “Are people going to be able to do it?” Nelson wants to know.

“How much food waste can we collect?” is another major question, according to Quantum Biopower vice president Brian Paganini. Connecticut studies have indicated that about 22 percent of residential trash is food waste, and Paganini said the West Hartford goal is to “get as close to that... as possible.”

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According to Phillips, the first few weeks have resulted in an average weekly food waste collection rate of 12.5 pounds per household.

Phillips wonders if there will be problems with additional odors from food waste containers, particularly when the weather is warm.

The West Hartford test was first suggested by Quantum Biopower officials, who opened up their \$14 million organic waste “anaerobic digestion” plant in Southington in January 2017. The waste goes into tanks that use microbes to eat the organic material and give off methane as a biological byproduct. The gas is then used to generate electricity.

Food waste that goes into the biopower plant must be as free as possible of plastics, metal, yard waste, and even biodegradable tea bags should not be put into the food waste bins, officials said.

So far, Paganini said, the food waste arriving from West Haven has been exactly what his operation needs. “It was well-segregated with a low contamination level,” he said of the first loads to arrive from the test families. “It was great.”

Everything also went well in Bridgewater in 2014 when that rural Western Connecticut community experimented with this state’s first curbside food waste recycling test program. At least in the beginning.

“It was very positively received,” recalled Jen Heaton-Jones, executive director of the [Housatonic Resources Recovery Authority](#), which includes Bridgewater among its member towns.

Bridgewater is a small, rural community with about 1,200 residents, Heaton-Jones said, and the sign-up rate for the pilot food waste curbside program was about 15 percent of homeowners. Each household was separating and recycling 9-12 pounds of food waste a week, which Heaton-Jones said is about the national average.

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Like West Hartford's experiment, the Bridgewater test was free to residents. As Heaton-Jones recalled, "That's where we went wrong."

When the test run was over, residents were asked to pay a small fee to continue with a regular curbside food waste program. Since residential garbage fees in the town are regulated by the amount of waste being picked up for each household, recycling food waste would cut that cost to a homeowner even when the new fee was figured in, Heaton-Jones said.

"As soon as the food waste fee kicked in, Heaton-Jones said, "We lost a lot of participation, a lot of people dropped out." The result was the end of the curbside program.

"Folks were really disappointed... that it stopped," Heaton-Jones said.

The alternative was a food waste recycling "drop off" program, where a resident of Bridgewater could drop off a bag of food waste at a local recycling center at no charge. Several of the regional recycling authority's towns now have similar programs, either at no cost or a very low fee for drop-off food waste recycling.

Heaton-Jones said her authority is hoping to make another stab at starting a curbside food waste program in the future and she is watching to see how well the West Hartford experiment is working.

She believes one reason why the Bridgewater program ultimately didn't work out was that the town was so rural and individual homes were so spread out that "it wasn't cost effective" for the trash hauler, which resulted in higher fees.

Heaton-Jones is convinced that a curbside program in a more densely populated community like West Hartford has a far better chance of success. And she believes that food waste recycling will eventually catch on all across the U.S. "It's all about saving money and doing the right thing," she said.

But Phillips admits he doesn't know exactly what the next step would be once West Hartford's experiment concludes. "I don't know what's going to happen when this test is over," he said.