

Testimony of the  
**Bronx Council for Environmental Quality**  
Submitted to the **New York City Council Joint Committee Hearing of  
Finance and Sanitation and Solid Waste Management** on the  
**FY21 Mayor’s Executive Budget**, May 14, 2020

**INTRODUCTION**

The Bronx Council for Environmental Quality (BCEQ) calls for restoration of planned multi-year budget cuts to composting, organic recycling, and recycling education programs as part of a renewed commitment to community health and environmental justice for Bronxites.

Just as our nation confronts the consequences of public health disparities and its underlying environmental causes, the Mayor’s Executive Budget adopts a “manage by budget” solution to revenue shortfall that will walk our city back from any lessons that can be learned from the COVID-19 crises. Indiscriminate budget cuts spread across multiple years and multiple city services shrinks the ability of the city as a whole to respond and recover from this crisis by ending key environmental programs.

BCEQ ([www.bceq.org](http://www.bceq.org)) is an all-volunteer 501c3 organization whose mission is “to establish — as an Inherent Human Right — a sound, forward-looking environmental policy regarding an aesthetic, unpolluted, environment protecting a natural and historic heritage.” We adopt composting and organic recycling as budget priorities because they are central to the Bronx’s environmental quality.

Before this crisis, Bronxites suffered the highest asthma rates in the United States, a wide disparity in the distribution of green space throughout the borough, and underinvestment in parkland and recreational access, particularly along its 200 miles of waterfront. As Bronxites struggle to recover from the recent devastating health crisis, they deserve and will require environmentally sustainable policies that address underlying community health conditions. Restoring budget cuts to NYC Compost Project and restoring organic recycling represents an essential investment towards this goal. Dr. Paul Mankiewicz of the Gaia Institute explains this:

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*“Compost has been documented to bind lead in soils. Square miles of green space in NYC are likely to contain legacy lead concentrations in the hundreds to thousands of parts per million. The application of compost to these soils would significantly drop the significant liabilities the City may hold on these properties. Vegetation and soil surfaces are sinks for particles, including virus. The application of compost to support plant growth in the City will likely contribute to the wellbeing of New Yorkers on this front as well.”*

## **PROPOSALS**

BCEQ proposes two measures for FY 2021 as part of an “budget by managing” approach to key resources and needs:

Baseline funding for NYC Compost Project that recognizes its success as the city’s composting policy body and community-based education program since 1993. Composting transforms waste into a valuable soil amendment, saves space in landfills and money on trash disposal, and helps citizens reclaim the green spaces that sequester carbon, clean our air, and filter our water. NYC Compost Project’s decentralized, community-based composting program helps us reach these goals by training community members to keep and process organic waste on site, reducing hauling costs and air pollution of “compost miles.” NYC Compost Project fund programs and outreach in over 200 partner sites in the Bronx alone, creating a network of green spaces throughout our borough.

Community-based organizations serving the most vulnerable Bronxites depend upon the compost outreach and training offered by NYC Compost Project to sustain their community gardens, which reduce the impact of food deserts on their vulnerable communities and provide essential health benefits. The Bronx’ community garden network has and continues to make important contributions to New York City’s racial and class equity; endangering them through the

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elimination of DSNY subsidies will make the city less equitable. Rather than eliminating community-based composting programs of NYC Compost Project by eliminating its single source of funding, its annual DSNY subsidy, BCEQ recommends that the City Council and the Mayor's Office on Resiliency adopt community-based composting metrics and models as a city-wide priority and shared fiscal responsibility.

BCEQ calls for the restoration of funding for organic curbside pickup and processing as a refocused program that “closes the loop” and turns compostable organic material back into soil amendments for New York City's network of parks, golf courses, green roofs, reservoir areas, bioswales, brownfields, waterfronts, and community gardens. NYC has made organic recycling vulnerable to budget cuts by funding the voluntary program only as a contribution to waste stream diversion. It has not reduced the waste stream sufficiently because: 1. It is voluntary program, with self-selected participants; and 2. it does not show or provide New Yorkers any real benefits. Organic waste is shipped to out of state compost processing centers, encumbering DSNY with hauling costs and fees. A citywide leader in advocating for green solutions to CSO outfall and a green urban infrastructure, BCEQ recommends the integration of an organic recycling system with a community-based composting program – the public-private partnership that adds value to the New York City environment and increases the productive capacity of all our green spaces, especially those that provide fresh air, clean water, and locally grown food, for our most vulnerable populations.

Restoring the NYC Compost Project contract is a first step in creating a comprehensive, economically feasible project. Just as the Philadelphia Horticultural Society helps Philly in the greening and sustainability of their communities, we can follow that model. Philly's Parks

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Department has a program<sup>1</sup> that charges fees for services such as grass disposal or mulch pickup. They even have a list of uses<sup>2</sup> for compost, including stormwater erosion control filter socks.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed cuts to DSNY subsidies for community composting and services for organic recycling put New York City on a backward path toward sustainability, environmental justice, and public health. BCEQ opposes these proposed cuts as bad environmental policy that will damage the national standing of New York City and its already underserved populations. They make the city less sustainable by withdrawing support for community composting, adding to our waste stream, and adding tonnage and costs to garbage removal.

Our current fiscal crisis does not call for conventional austerity budget policy but a strategic focus on the programs and policies that make the city and its people healthy. BCEQ holds up the success of NYC Compost Project, its model of community-based composting, and a closed-loop organic recycling program as strategies for a healthier New York City and calls upon the Mayor, the City Council, and Borough Presidents to work together to fund the essential environmental policies necessary for our recovery.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment. For more information, contact us at [communications@bceq.org](mailto:communications@bceq.org)

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.phila.gov/media/20190512150443/2019-ORC-Price-Update-Flyer\\_V3.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20190512150443/2019-ORC-Price-Update-Flyer_V3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.phila.gov/media/20171115162327/Compost\\_Use\\_Direction\\_Sheet.pdf](https://www.phila.gov/media/20171115162327/Compost_Use_Direction_Sheet.pdf)