
Food Scraps Collection Program
Research and Survey Report

September 2016

Prepared for Metro



by JLA Public Involvement, Inc.



I. INTRODUCTION

1) Food scraps collection program background

For the past decade or so, Metro regional government and local cities and counties have been taking steps to keep food out of landfills. Food accounts for 19 percent of what Portland metro residents and businesses send to a landfill—the largest portion of our waste by far. When buried in a landfill, this food produces methane—a major greenhouse gas. Food scraps could be put to better use—such as to create compost and electricity.

Currently, businesses in the Metro area can *voluntarily* separate their food scraps from their garbage and their waste and recycling company picks up these food scraps separately. The food scraps then go on to get composted or turned into energy.

2) Interview purpose and background

JLA Public Involvement conducted 47 telephone and in-person interviews with businesses that generate food waste. An additional 11 businesses completed an online survey that asked the same questions as the interview. The interviews and online survey were limited to businesses in certain sectors with a large number of employees, including:

- Large grocery stores (20 or more employees)
- Large full-service restaurants (20 or more employees)
- Large food service operations within hospitals, schools and corporate campuses

The key **purpose** of the interviews was to help Metro understand the incentives and motivations that would make it easier for businesses to collect food scraps, as well as barriers they face. The input will be used to help Metro, cities and counties improve their food scraps collection programs and motivate more companies to participate.

This report summarizes key themes heard from the 58 businesses that participated in the interviews and online survey. The appendix includes charts summarizing input for every question asked, as well a list of verbatim open-ended responses and other comments.

II. INTERVIEWEES

Interviewees were selected to represent a mix of businesses that *currently participate* in the food scraps program, that *participated in the past*, and that *do not participate*. Businesses were selected across the three county area—Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties. Businesses within the City of Portland boundaries were not interviewed, as they are being surveyed via a separate yet closely related project.

1) Characteristics of Interview Participants

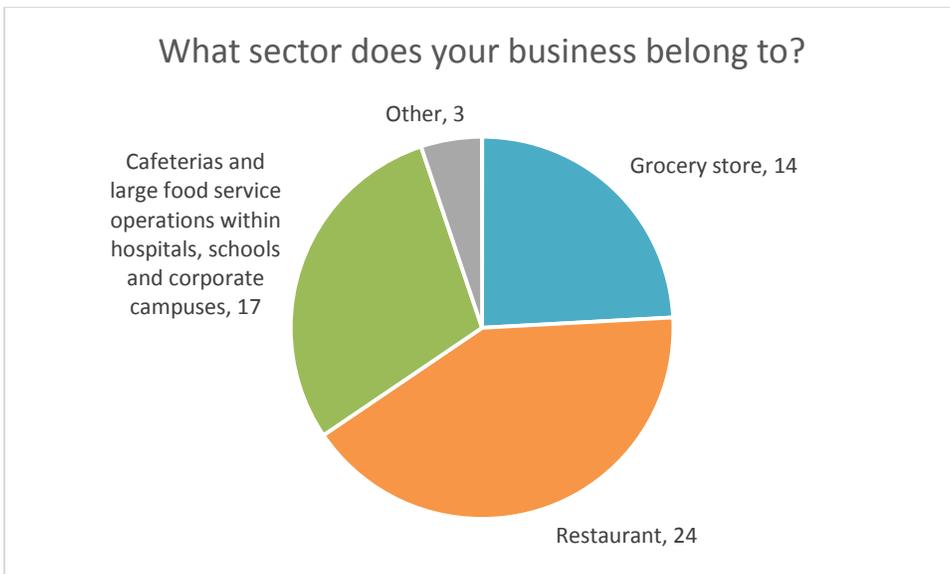
a. Participation Level in Food Scraps Collection

Thirty-four businesses interviewed said they currently separate food scraps from other garbage, eight used to separate food scraps but do not currently, and 16 said they do not separate food scraps from garbage.



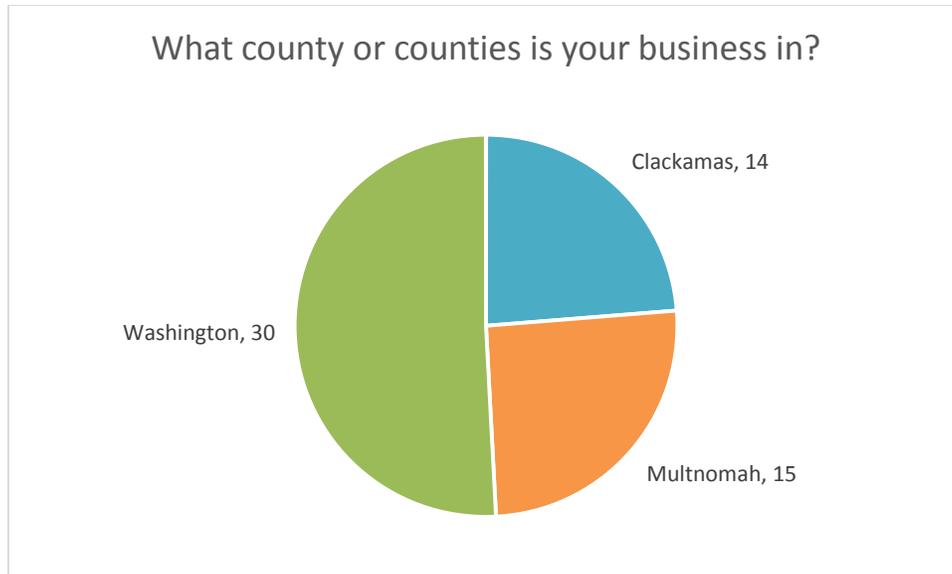
b. Sector

Businesses indicated the sector to which they belong.



“Other” businesses were large companies that had on-site kitchens for employee use, but did not generate food for sale.

c. Geography



d. Minority-owned and Limited English Proficiency

Minority-owned businesses and businesses that employ a large number of limited English proficiency staff may have different concerns and barriers to participation in the food scraps program. In order to learn about these barriers, JLA oversampled businesses with these characteristics.

Seven businesses identified as minority owned (4 Hispanic owned, 1 Japanese owned, 1 Thai owned, and 1 Vietnamese owned)

17 businesses indicated that they have many employees that do not speak English well. Most of these indicated that Spanish was the main language spoken. A few said that many languages are spoken at their companies, and a couple identified Russian and Vietnamese as the main language spoken.

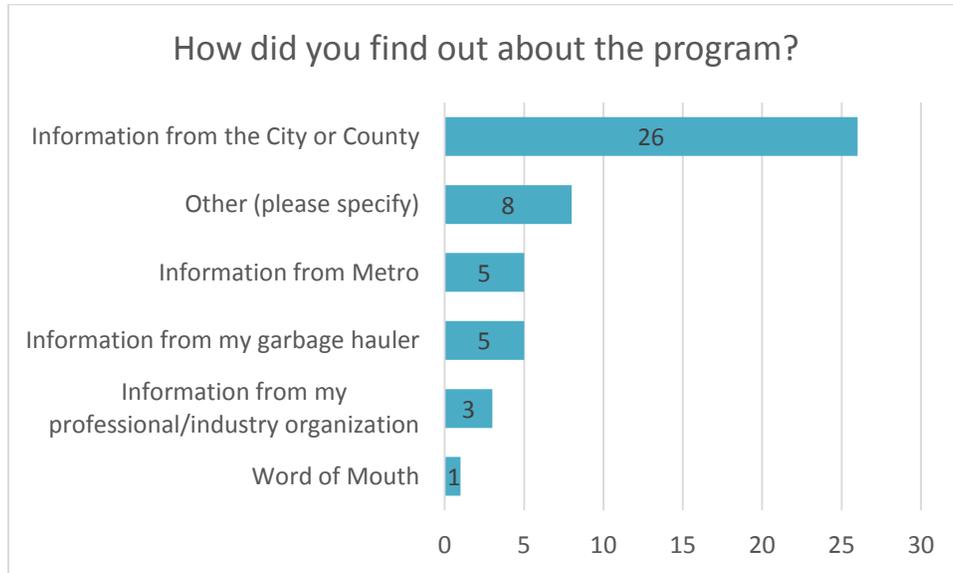
III. KEY THEMES AND TRENDS

1) Knowledge of program

79% of participants said they know about the program. 21% said they do not know about the program.

Most said they heard about the program through their city or county staff. Many said that an agency employee physically came to their facility to let them know about the program.

Among other comments, some said they sought out a composting program on their own initiative and looked up the program online or contacted their city, county, or Metro. Some were instructed to participate via their corporate office or by their business complex due to shared garbage facilities.



2) What motivates businesses to participate?

Businesses that currently participate in the program or participated in the past explained what motivated them to start collecting food scraps. Most commonly, businesses said they wanted to **reduce the amount of garbage sent to landfills** and do something **good for the environment**. A number of businesses said they have company sustainability policies in place that require them to separate food scraps (for example, LEED certification or zero-landfill policies). Some had staff (or in the case of school cafeterias, students) that were **personally motivated to compost** or put sustainability measures in place, which drove program implementation.

Some were also hoping to **save money on their garbage bill**. This was a particularly strong motivator for participants who used to separate food scraps but no longer participate in the program. While some businesses report they did see cost

savings, most found that it costs *more* to participate in the program because they have to both devote more staff time to separating food scraps, plus pay a separate hauler fee. Businesses that saw cost savings tended to be larger operations with a high quantity of food waste. Some participants said they were originally motivated to start composting as part of a pilot program that covered the cost of their separate hauler fee, but they discontinued once the financial assistance was no longer available.

“We are a sustainable, zero-landfill company. Composting fits in with our mission.”

- Corporate campus dining facility

“Why throw food away as waste when it can be re-used?”

- Restaurant owner

Few businesses were motivated by a desire to appeal to customers or for public relations purposes. Within schools, improving student morale and involving students in running the food scraps collection program was a motivation to participate.

One additional motivator that was identified by four businesses was a desire to cooperate with city officials who visited their businesses, or because they were **convinced by a city official** and pilot program. The influence of in-person visits came up throughout several of the interviews.



Distinction among sectors

Both food service operations and restaurants were most motivated by environmental reasons or to reduce the amount of garbage sent to landfills, and not so much by a desire to save money on garbage bills. Grocery stores were much more likely to be motivated by a desire to reduce their garbage bill, although many were motivated by environmental reasons as well. Several grocery stores, especially larger stores with lots of fresh produce and meat, did report reduced garbage bill costs by participating in the formal or informal composting program. This was in contrast to the majority of participants, who found that it cost more to participate in the program than to simply throw everything into the landfill-destined garbage dumpster.

“It’s nice to tell customers, but it’s not a driving factor. Keeping garbage costs low was the main factor.”
 - Grocery store owner

Interestingly, one restaurant was motivated to participate in order to keep its garbage dumpster clean: by keeping food scraps separate, only dry garbage goes into the dumpster, keeping it a lot cleaner with reduced odors.

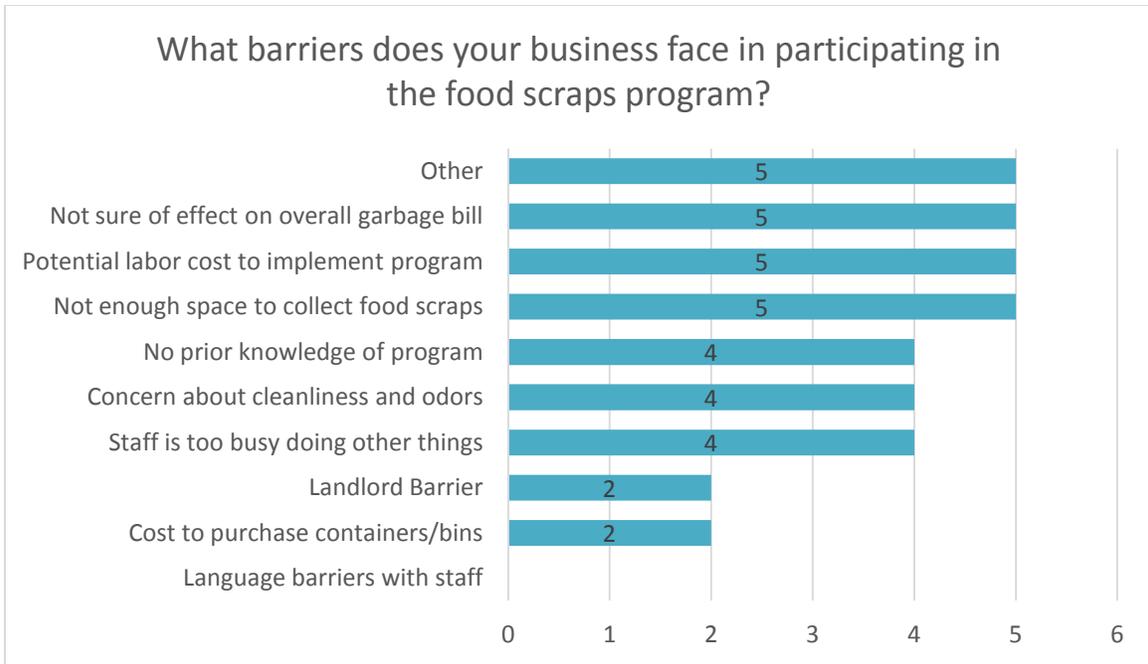
What would motivate businesses to re-start?

Interviewees who *used to* participate in the food scraps collection program but no longer participate explained what might motivate them to restart the program. All eight interviewees who answered this question had varied responses. A few said they collect food scraps through their own programs (for example, by sending spoiled produce to local farmers); these businesses are **satisfied with their internal program** and would not want to participate in a formal program with haulers. A few would like the program to **cost less**, such as by providing financial assistance to businesses, eliminating the additional hauler fee, or providing free occasional cleaning of external bins. Two suggested different-sized **internal and external collection containers** and liners. Another noted the company had **too little food waste** and it didn't seem worth it to participate.

3) Why businesses don't participate: Barriers to participation

Non-participants rated a list of barriers that keep them from separating food scraps. Key barriers include:

- Potential **cost increases**, including an increase in garbage fees and staff hours. Some said that even if they agree with the environmental goals of the program, they would not participate if it would significantly increase cost or labor hours. Businesses were concerned about the time it would take to train staff and the time needed to clean out collection containers. Some noted that with other governmental regulations (such as the minimum wage increase), businesses are being asked to bear too much of a burden for meeting guidelines they view as being politically motivated.
- **Not enough space** available to collect food scraps. Some restaurants do not have much space in cramped kitchens for additional bins (in addition to their regular garbage and recycling bins), or have limited outdoor space for an additional external container.
- Other barriers include:
 - Landlord or property manager would not allow it, even though the business would like to participate.
 - Current participation in an informal food scraps collection program, such as by donating food to food banks or to local farmers. These programs work well and do not cost anything.
 - Lack of knowledge about the program.
 - The low volume of food waste doesn't seem worth it to participate.



Differences among sectors

For restaurants, the key barriers include lack of space in the kitchen for extra bins, and a perception that it would be too much of a burden on staff that is too busy with other tasks. Cost issues are also a key barrier: namely the additional labor cost to implement the program, cost to purchase bins and containers, and unknown effect on overall garbage bill.

For grocery stores, the key concern is the unknown effect on overall garbage bills as well as the potential labor cost in separating food scraps.

One new barrier identified was the difficulty of dealing with packaged foods. For businesses that have a lot of packaged foods, separating food scraps requires opening each individual box or container and segregating contents; this is a much larger use of time than, for example, a restaurant that can just dump whole piles of unused and scrap food into a collection container.

“Cost is the biggest issue. I would not separate food scraps if it causes my prices to go up. It needs to be at least cost-neutral.”

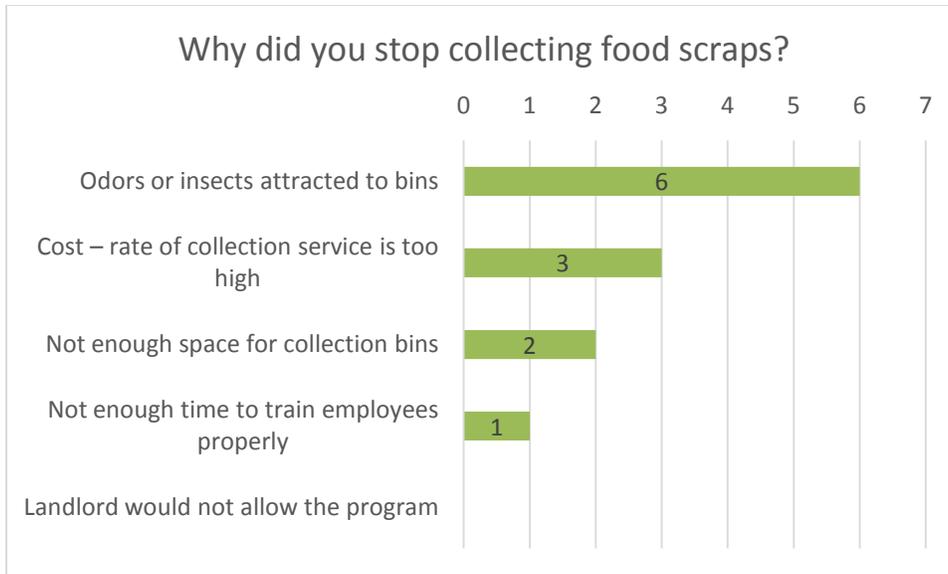
– Restaurant interviewee

“I’m concerned about how much staff time it would take to separate food scraps from garbage.”

– Grocery store owner

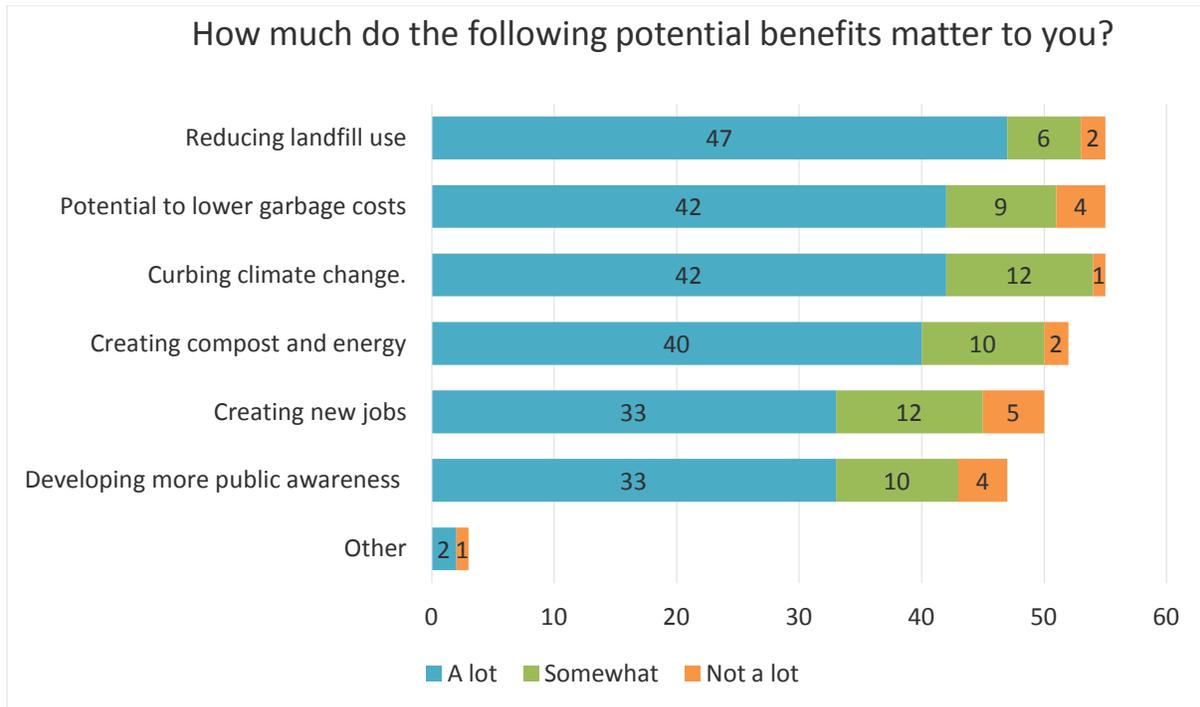
4) Why did businesses stop participating?

Eight businesses indicated why they stopped collecting food scraps. The most common reason was **odors or insects** attracted to bins, and this was a problem across all business sectors. While some found that the cost of collection service did increase, this was not the main reason for discontinuing participation; it was odors or insects that were more of a problem.



5) Perceived Benefits of Participating in the Program

All interviewees were asked what they see as the potential benefits of collecting and processing food scraps. They rated a list of potential benefits:



For current program participants as well as discontinued participants, **reducing landfill use** and **curbing climate change** were top benefits. Many current participants said they do not see any cost savings from composting, so this is not an important message to them; they tend to participate due to the company’s or individual employee/owner environmental ideals.

For non-participants, although environmental benefits were important, it is the **potential to reduce costs** that would motivate them to actually participate. Many said they agree with the need to reduce landfill use and curb climate change on a personal level, but as businesspeople they need the program to be **cost-neutral or provide cost savings** in order to participate. One suggested showing examples of how businesses were able to reduce costs using the program in order to encourage participation.

Several interviewees did note the struggle between wanting to do the “right thing” versus the most cost or labor efficient choice. For example, one company saves spoiled produce for a local pig farmer to pick up because the farmer has free daily pick-ups and does not require the company to package produce into specialized bins. If that company were to participate in the formal City program, it would need to put produce in specific hauler-provided bins, clean those bins, and pay the additional hauler fee. According to the company, this second scenario increases costs and labor too much.

Differences among sectors

Restaurants and grocery stores were more likely to say that the potential to reduce costs is very important to them. However, many of these businesses that do currently separate food scraps noted that they have not seen any cost savings, and they participate due to environmental reasons or wanting to reduce landfill use. Several school cafeterias said that they are motivated by the program because it involves the students in a unique way, giving them a sense of environmental stewardship and responsibility for their food waste.

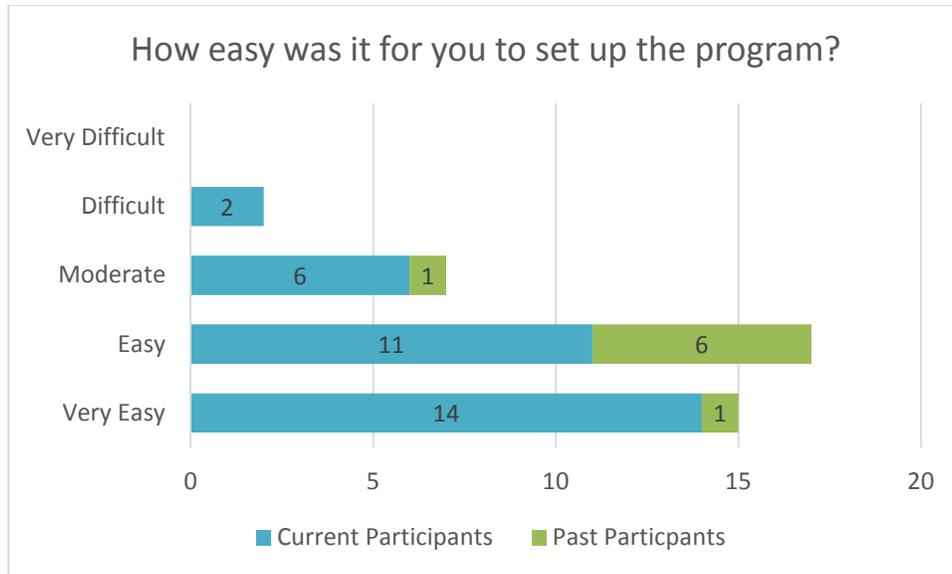
“Cost is the most important thing. It is great when you can set up a program that has many benefits: save money, create a job, and recycle—all at the same time.”

- Grocery store interviewee

6) Suggested Improvements: What would make it easier to participate?

a. How easy was it to set up the program?

Most people who participate said it was **easy or very easy to set up** their food scraps collection program. In many cases, it was on-site assistance and educational materials from city or county staff that made set up so easy. Several said that they got a lot of individualized agency support because they were part of a pilot program.



b. What would make it easier to participate?

Current Participants

Among those who currently separate food scraps, many said that they **do not need any changes** to the program to make it easier to participate. Others said that the following would make it easier:

- More **educational materials** that provide instructions on composting for employees. Businesses that have many non-English speaking staff added that **materials in other languages** would be helpful. Many businesses stated they were provided with useful materials from city and county programs.
- **Better ways to get employees to properly separate food scraps** from other garbage. Employee motivation can be a major hurdle at some businesses. Some suggested more education to employees about the benefits of composting in order to motivate them.

“Agency staff was very helpful. A staff person met with me in person, provided outside receptacles, taught my staff how to separate food scraps, and talked to my hauler about pickup.”

- School cafeteria interviewee

One of the biggest issues for businesses is **training and monitoring** employees to properly separate food scraps from garbage. This is particularly difficult for businesses that have many non-English speakers. Several noted that it takes months of training and monitoring to get all staff to properly separate food scraps. Any changes in the program are then difficult to adapt to (for example, when the program recently changed such that businesses could no longer mix paper products in with food scraps).

- **Linners for bins** or better **ways to keep collection containers clean**. This is important both for internal and external bins. Some noted a need to provide more frequent, free clean-up of *outside* bins by haulers. Others would like better ways to deal with **rodents, insects, and odors**

in outdoor collection—which are a key barrier to participation for restaurants and some larger food generators.

Free bins provided by haulers or agency programs were helpful, and several said they would like to have **more size options** (bins were too small or too big for some businesses based on their particular needs).

Past Participants

Businesses that used to participate in the program identified the following things that would make it easier to participate:

- **More frequent pickup and cleaning of external containers.** Several businesses said that problems with **odors and rodents**, particularly in summer months, caused them to stop participating. More frequent pickup, as well as better, sealed outdoor containers could help curb odors and pest problems.
- **Financial help** with program start up and maintenance, or eliminating the additional hauler fee. Several participants signed up for their local pilot program that provided free pickup, but they dropped out once they had to pay the hauler fee.
- **More space for collection bins.**
- Retirement communities in particular noted that they need a food scraps collection system that is **less of a burden** for their residents. Many residents eat meals in their rooms and it is difficult to conceive of a food scraps separation system that would work for them.

“We were initially given free bio-degradable bags to collect food scraps. But those cost money. Instead, we use regular garbage bags to collect food scraps and then rip them open to dump into the outside container. We have to sterilize buckets each night.”

- Restaurant owner

Differences among sectors

Among all sectors, **free liners for bins** or some other way to keep exterior bins clean was identified as something that would be very helpful. Several identified the cost of keeping containers clean as a key difficulty to participating. A couple suggested financial support for cleaning exterior bins more often (or free occasional cleanings).

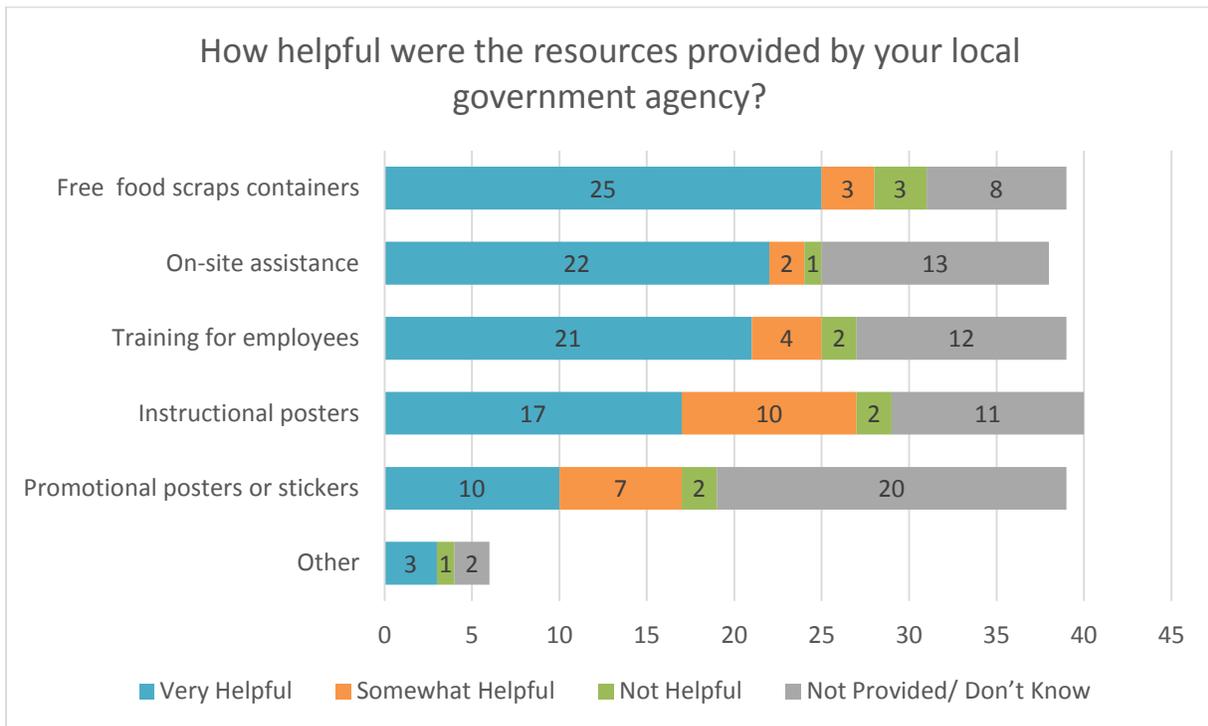
All sectors indicated that **more frequent pickup** would be desired to help reduce odors, particularly during the summer months where food spoils more quickly in the heat and attracts rodents and pests.

Grocery stores in particular noted that **educating their employees** to separate food scraps is difficult and would like better ways to motivate them to comply with guidelines.

Large food-producers noted that the size of outside bins provided by haulers is too small. They need industrial sized bins rather than 60-gallon roll carts.

7) Helpfulness of current resources

Interviewees that do participate in the food scraps collection program were asked to rate the helpfulness of resources provided by local government agencies. The most helpful resources were free food scrap containers and on-site assistance.



Differences among sectors

Restaurants and large food service operations tended to agree that promotional posters and instructional posters for employees were helpful. Grocery stores did not find these resources as helpful. Grocery stores and some other businesses do not find promotional posters very helpful because there is not an obvious place to hang them.

Spanish-speaking businesses found Spanish-language materials and training to be very helpful.

“A city agent came on-site and trained employees for a week. They then came back to check in several times during the school year.”

- School cafeteria interviewee

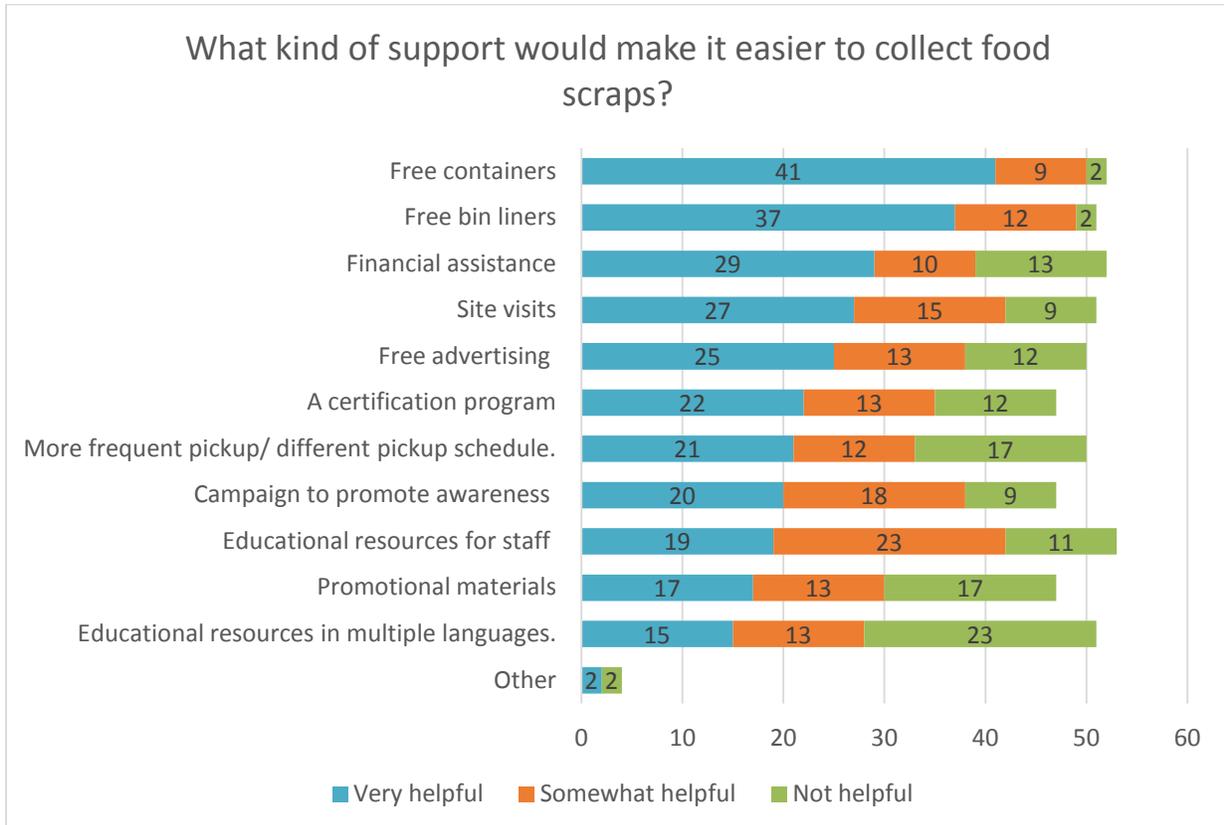
Businesses across all sectors found on-site assistance and trainings to be very helpful, especially for large food service operations. Trainings were especially helpful when agency staff provided a training and then came to check on the business over a period of months to help with troubleshooting.

One restaurant and one grocery store said that free internal food scraps containers were not helpful because they were too large. They had to buy their own containers, and they did not have lids.

Some businesses that were part of a chain or corporation did not find much utility with posters because all materials have to have their company branding, and so they made their own materials.

8) Suggested Improvements: Agency resources and help

Interviewees were presented with a list of resources and assistance that city and county staff make available to businesses. Interviewees rated these resources on how helpful they would be to make it easier to collect food scraps.



Past and current participants as well as non-participants all rated the following two as the top most helpful resources:

- **Free internal containers** to collect food scraps. Many current participants said they were provided with free containers and these were very helpful. Some suggested that these internal containers should have lids and be water-tight, or a different size. It would be useful to have a variety of size options to meet the different needs of diverse businesses.
- **Free bin liners** to keep collection containers cleaner and help reduce odors and rodent problems. Purchasing compostable liners is too expensive for many businesses.

Current and past participants found the following resources to be very helpful:

- **Site visits** from city or county staff to help with initial program setup and trouble-shooting. Some would like to see more ongoing visits and check-ins from city and county staff.
- **Educational resources** to instruct employees on how to separate food scraps.
- **Financial assistance** to help offset program costs.

Non-participants said the following resources would be very helpful or motivate them to participate:

- **More frequent pickup** of collection containers in order to reduce odors and rodent problems—which is a top concern for non-participants. Some would also like a more convenient pickup schedule.
- **Financial assistance.** But if the program still costs money, then some would not participate. There is the cost both of a hauler fee *and* staff time to separate food scraps.
- **Free advertising** to promote businesses who participate in the program.
- **Site visits** from city or county staff to help with initial program setup and trouble-shooting. Some said that *ongoing* support is needed—not just at program startup.
- **Having agency staff conduct outreach to landlords or property managers** to convince them to participate. In some cases, the business itself cannot make this decision.
- Develop a **scaled-down program for smaller businesses** that do not have very many food scraps. Some said the current program seemed geared for larger food producers.

There was a variety of comments about frequency of pick up schedule. Those who had food scraps pickup only once per week said that this was not enough, particularly in the hot summer months. Those who had food scraps pick up three or more times per week said this was sufficient. Flexibility in pick up schedules is a key issue for many businesses.

Differences among sectors

For **large food service operations** like cafeterias, hospitals and senior centers, the most helpful resources include free bin liners and internal containers, as well as financial assistance. These businesses were less likely to say that free advertising, a certification program, or promotional materials would be very useful. Several of these operations noted that they only collect food scraps in kitchens currently (not in the cafeterias or dining areas); if they were to expand food scraps collection to dining areas, then more frequent pickup would be needed, and more posters and educational resources for students and clients would be helpful.

Grocery store interviewees reiterated that the cost of additional hauler service and labor costs to separate food scraps are the biggest barriers, as well as smells associated with food scraps in the outside garbage area. Any resources to help with these costs and reducing odors would be the most useful. They identified free internal containers, bin liners, and site visits as the most helpful resources.

As with the other sectors, **restaurants** stated that free internal collection containers and bin liners would be the most useful. Several specified that bin liners must be biodegradable and accepted by their haulers (some agencies provided free bags that were not accepted by haulers). But unlike the other sectors, they identified that free advertising and a certification program would be beneficial. They were

also more likely to find more frequent pick-up to be important, particularly in the summer months when they have more business and when the heat tends to rot food scraps faster.

Restaurants were split on whether promotional materials would be helpful; with half saying they would be very helpful and half saying they would not be helpful. Some of these noted that company branding requirements would prevent them from using any agency-provided promotional materials. Some smaller restaurants felt they may not have enough food scraps to make it worth participating, and suggested flexibility in roll cart size or other measures to make it easier for small businesses to participate.

9) What thoughts do you have about a mandatory program?

Interviewees fell into four positions on how they perceive a mandatory program:

In Favor: Nearly 45% were in favor of having everyone participate in the food scraps collection program. Many supported a program that would keep food out of landfills and turn it into compost and bioenergy, and were enthusiastic about the environmental benefits. Some noted that it would likely be welcome for businesses that have sustainability as part of their mission, but could be difficult for smaller businesses.

Neutral or no opinion: About 15% said that if it mandated they will comply, and did not have strong concerns.

Concerned but not opposed: About 30% supported the goals of a mandated program but had some concerns. Key concerns and suggestions to make the mandated program easier include:

- A key concern is **increased cost** due to a separate hauler fee and labor time. A few suggested financial assistance to help businesses with the cost. A couple of businesses wondered why the program has a fee at all. Some stated that since the city is selling compost and bioenergy, it seems like these revenues should be passed onto the businesses that provide food scraps.
- The need for adequate **education for employees** to get everyone to comply. A couple of people noted that if just a small amount of garbage gets mixed in with food scraps, then the business could be penalized. This is a concern for larger companies where it is difficult to monitor all employees (or in the case of schools and retirement communities—monitoring students and residents).
- The program should be **flexible** and still allow businesses to send leftover food to food banks and local farmers if these programs work better than the formal hauler program.
- A different approach may be needed in different counties. For example, a mandate and sustainability messaging may work well in Multnomah County, whereas a mandate could be unwelcome in Clackamas County.
- Especially among large food service operations and some restaurants, there is concern about mandating food scraps collection in both the kitchen *and* “front of house.” It is easier to monitor

and regulate garbage separation in the kitchens, but difficult to regulate students and restaurant patrons.

Opposed: Only about 10% of interviewees were entirely opposed to a mandate. They said that the expense of implementing government policies should fall on everyone—not just businesses. Several noted they are not in favor of increased governmental regulation as businesses already have so many other mandates that increase costs, such as the increased minimum wage.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

As Metro, cities and counties continue to improve their food scraps collection programs, they may want to consider implementing the following suggestions and guidelines.

1) Resources agencies should provide to businesses

Agencies should continue to provide **free collection containers** and expand the program to include a range of sizes (both internal and external containers). Businesses have a range of container-size needs, and some suggested smaller internal collection bins that would be less heavy to take outside. Several would like internal collection containers that have lids, especially if the containers will be in viewing range of clients and customers or located in dining facilities.

They should also provide **free compostable bin liners** and even **free or subsidized cleaning of external collection containers**, since smells and rodent problems are a key barrier to participation. If this is not possible, agencies should consider providing educational materials that show simple ways to keep containers clean and reduce odors, or provide case study examples of businesses that have done this well.

Agencies should also continue to provide **on-site assistance and training** as well as **educational materials** that show participants how to separate food scraps. These resources have been very helpful to current participants. Educational materials could be expanded to illustrate:

- **Examples of typical costs** for different business types and sizes. The cost samples should include the additional food scraps collection hauler fee and potential cost savings due to reduced regular garbage pickup.
- **How to prevent odors and rodent problems**, as well as recommendations for how often food scraps should be picked up based on volume.
- **How to most efficiently run a food scraps separation program.** A key barrier to participation is the increased staff time that would be devoted to separating food scraps and cleaning bins. Agencies could consider interviewing businesses to understand how their staff separates food scraps from garbage and cleans containers in order to demonstrate that it does not take a lot of additional staff time.

On-site assistance could be expanded to include occasional check-ins after a business establishes its program. Several businesses said they would have liked on-going support, not just initial set-up support.

2) Issues to address with the current program(s)

- **Flexibility in pick-up schedule** is a key issue for many businesses. If they do not already do so, haulers should provide a range of pick-up options, from once a week to daily pickup. It would be useful to allow more frequent pickup for the summer months only when smells and rodent problems are at their worst; this is also the busy season for many restaurants.
- The program should be **flexible to meet the needs of various business sizes** and food generation amounts. Some businesses felt they do not generate enough food scraps to make it worth participating; or bins were too large and hauler fees too high to justify participating.
- The program should **allow businesses to use other programs** to keep their food scraps out of landfills. Many businesses send leftover food to food banks, or send produce and meat products to local farmers or to rendering facilities. These businesses are satisfied with their current systems, which are often more flexible and cheaper than participating in the official agency-run programs. It may be necessary to **define what counts as participating** in the food scraps program. For example: will cafeterias and dining halls be required to separate the food scraps of their patrons, or is kitchen-area separation sufficient? Will businesses be penalized for choosing to send their leftover food to food banks and local farmers?
- Consider **different messaging and approaches** depending on the county and political stances. For example, a mandate and sustainability messaging may work well in Multnomah County, whereas a mandate could be unwelcome in Clackamas County.
- If a mandatory program is instituted, it will be important to address how to handle food scraps when **multiple businesses share garbage, recycling and composting facilities** (for example, businesses that are part of a strip mall with shared facilities). If a multi-business complex includes both businesses that are required to separate food scraps and others that are exempt, how can they effectively share and manage waste facilities?
- Many businesses said they struggled when the Metro composting program stopped allowing fibers and compostable containers mixed in with food scraps. It was difficult to retrain employees, some haulers did not communicate program updates well, and businesses did not receive instructional posters to reflect the program change in a timely manner. In the future, **changes to the program should be accompanied by education and outreach** to make the transition easier for businesses, which could also include on-site assistance and visits.