

HENNEPIN COUNTY  
MINNESOTA

# The development of the Zero Waste Plan

2022

*A report to the Hennepin County of Board of Commissioners to summarize the  
process to develop the Zero Waste Plan proposed actions*

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# Introduction

The Hennepin County Board of Commissioners directed staff to develop an operational plan to move Hennepin County toward a zero-waste future. A zero-waste future is defined as a waste management system where all materials are designed to become resources for others to use. The county has defined zero waste as preventing 90% or more of all discarded materials from being landfilled or incinerated.

In 2021, approximately 1.3 million tons of waste was generated in Hennepin County. Of that 39% was recycled or composted, and the rest was managed as trash. Waste composition studies show that approximately 25% of what is currently trashed is compostable material, 15% is recyclable, 20% is potentially divertible, and 40% has no viable diversion options currently.

Despite implementing many progressive programs and policies aimed at reducing waste and increasing recycling over the past several decades, it has been challenging for Hennepin County to achieve a recycling rate greater than 50%.

Waste touches all our lives, but historically the system to manage it hasn't been equitable to all residents and businesses. Shared responsibility is needed, but we also must shift who benefits from the system to ensure those currently burdened by the system are able to participate in ways that reduce racial disparities and advance equity.

Reaching zero waste will require significant changes to current solid waste policies, programs, product design, consumption habits, and resources. It will require engaging and supporting communities and local businesses in new and creative ways to build momentum and spur collective action to advance a more equitable zero-waste future.

## About this report

This report was developed to provide an executive summary of the Zero Waste Plan's proposed aims and actions for the county board to consider at a board briefing in January 2023, as well as a summary of the process and what was learned at each phase of the process.

Commissioners also sought an engagement process to provide space for residents to express their concerns about the county's waste-to-energy facility, the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC). Some residents have expressed a distrust of the county's intentions regarding the operations of HERC, how it fits within the county's solid waste system, and our commitment to advancing a zero-waste future.

The consultants and staff coordinating the development of the Zero Waste Plan created space for HERC to be discussed, documented what was heard, and carried these concerns forward throughout the process. What was heard about the solid waste system and HERC is summarized and illustrated by quotes from participants throughout this summary document. There continues to be productive

tensions around HERC and its role in the county's waste management system, and the county is committed to continue to be in conversations about HERC and advancing a zero-waste future.

To increase transparency, we used an online engagement tool and an email subscription to provide updates at key steps in the process. Additional information and the supporting documents referenced in this report can be found online at [beheardhennepin.org/zero-waste-future](https://beheardhennepin.org/zero-waste-future)

# Mapping a zero-waste future: aims and actions

During the Zero Waste Plan development process, more than 110 actions were proposed and refined by action planning work group participants to map the county to a zero-waste future. The refined list of proposed actions is described in detail in the supporting [Draft Actions Summary](#). Actions are organized around four main aims, summarized below.

## **Aim 1: Create a materials management system that reduces racial disparities and advances equity**

Inequity in the waste system unfairly shifts some of the impacts of waste management to overburdened communities, creates disproportionate access to services and opportunities, and results in pollution unfairly borne by communities and neighborhoods experiencing disparities. This includes the impacts that hauling and waste facilities such as the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) and landfills have on their adjacent communities.

To create an equitable zero-waste system, shared responsibility is needed. Communities, businesses, government, and the waste industry must contribute equitably to the effort. If only a portion of the county has access to programs that achieve zero waste or the negative impacts of waste processing are borne by a sector of the community, zero waste will not be achievable, nor will the system be equitable.

The actions proposed under Aim 1 address concerns and solutions that emerged during engagement with community members often left out of the solid waste decision-making process. Proposed actions include expanding recycling and organics collection and drop-off options, addressing litter, improving recycling and organics recycling access at multifamily properties, increasing living-wage green jobs, establishing a waste equity panel, funding community solutions, providing financial incentives for participation, and establishing milestones to phase-out HERC.

## **Aim 2: Expand the reach of county education, grants, and programs**

The county has many effective programs to help residents, businesses, and institutions reduce and divert waste, but awareness of these programs is lacking. Examples of existing programs include grants for multifamily properties, businesses, building deconstruction, and community organizations; Ordinance 13 recycling requirements for multifamily properties and businesses and organics diversion requirements for large food waste generators; and residential educational programming such as the Zero Waste, Stop Food Waste, and Plastic-Free challenges, Fix-It Clinics, and Choose to Reuse.

The actions proposed under Aim 2 build upon existing programming to collectively increase their impacts, expand their reach, and add new targets. Proposed actions include improved marketing of existing programs and resources, expanding grant and technical assistance to businesses, multifamily properties, schools, and building contractors, improving compliance with Ordinance 13 recycling and organics recycling requirements, expanding education and outreach, and ensuring adequate capacity to process organics.

### **Aim 3: Adopt policies that accelerate the transition to a zero-waste future**

To reach zero waste, policy changes are needed to ensure that responsible recovery of materials is standard practice throughout the community. Well-designed policy at both the local and state level is a key component of successful zero-waste systems. The community scan conducted during the Zero Waste Plan development process found that policies such as disposal bans, extended producer responsibility, mandatory programs, and organized collection were key system components in communities with high recycling rates.

The actions proposed under Aim 3 will require action at the city, county, and state level to move the county to an equitable zero-waste system. Proposed actions include adopting extended producer responsibility for product packaging, right to repair and single-use product ban policies, developing a food waste reduction target and plan, transitioning to organized collection, and implementing a county procurement policy that aligns with a circular economy.

### **Aim 4: Implement programs to advance circularity, reduce waste, and support reuse**

The county must look beyond end of life and recycling and shift more of its focus to upstream impacts, reuse, waste minimization, and the built environment. By supporting material end markets, the county can help create a resilient circular economy at the regional level. In such a system, demand for reused or recycled commodities can drive supply and create favorable economic conditions for increased recovery.

The actions proposed under Aim 4 look to innovative solutions to change the way we view and manage materials. Proposed actions include expanding reuse and repair options, increasing deconstruction and building material reuse, establishing a county innovation hub, strengthening end markets, and expanding financial incentives for the reuse industry.

# Overview of the plan development process

The development of Hennepin County's Zero Waste Plan included a review of the existing waste management system and the programs and policies that influence it, a robust engagement process of community members and industry stakeholders, and the identification of actions that will accelerate Hennepin County's path to zero waste. The plan was developed to complement the county's newly adopted Climate Action Plan and will be the foundation for the county's state mandated 2024 Solid Waste Management Plan.

Hennepin County contracted with several consultants and community groups to develop the plan. Dr. Antonia Apolinário-Wilcoxon, a local diversity, equity and inclusion facilitator, and 18 community groups were hired to conduct community engagement centered on community voices traditionally left out of the solid waste management decision-making process. Resource Recycling Systems (RRS) conducted a gaps analysis of the county's solid waste system, completed a scan of communities with high recycling rates, facilitated industry and other stakeholder engagement, and developed the plan.

County staff coordinated and supported the efforts of the consultants and community groups. This team included waste reduction and recycling managers and recycling specialists, an environmental education manager and specialists, and communications and engagement coordinators.

This report provides a summary of the process and learnings of Phase 1 and 2. After receiving feedback from the board, staff and consultants will complete Phase 3 and 4 as described in the graphic below.

## Plan development process



## Zero Waste Plan community groups

The Zero Waste Plan's team of consultants and county staff acknowledge the significant contribution of the community groups to ensure community voices traditionally left out of the solid waste management decision-making process were centered in the plan development process.

### Thank you!

- Action to Equity
- Audubon Neighborhood Association
- Center for Hmong Arts and Talent
- Climate Generation/Youth Environmental Activists of Minnesota (YEA! MN)
- Community Power/MN EJ Table
- Congregations Caring for Creation/Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light
- Eastside Neighborhood Services
- Ebenezer Oromo Evangelical Church
- Encouraging Leaders
- Lao Assistance Center of Minnesota
- Little Earth Protectors
- McKinley Community
- MN Renewable Now
- NoMi Roots
- Off The Blue Couch
- Somali American Women Action Center
- Resilient Cities and Communities with Inquilinx Unidxs por Justicia
- Thai Cultural Council of Minnesota



# Using the Racial Equity Impact Tool

The plan's development process was guided by Hennepin County's Racial Equity Impact Tool (REIT) to ensure the plan aligns with the county's goals to reduce disparities. Two county REIT Champions served on the core planning team, and staff from the county's Engagement Services participated in consultant and community contract selection and provided input throughout the process.

## Defining desired results

The first step of applying the REIT is clearly defining the plan's goals, objectives, and measurable outcomes. For this plan, this step was outlined by the county board: develop an operational plan to map Hennepin County to an equitable zero-waste future that includes a broad community engagement process with a strong focus on equity and disparity reduction. The measurable outcome is 90% diversion from incinerators or landfills.

## Analyzing the data

Another step in the REIT process is considering who benefits and who is burdened. Staff identified Black, Indigenous and other people of color, as well as low-income residents and residents with disabilities as commonly not benefiting from and being more burdened by the current solid waste system. This is most prevalent for residents living in cities with solid waste facilities, multifamily housing or rental units, areas with high rates of illegal dumping and litter, densely populated communities that experience more trash truck traffic, and areas affected by cumulative health impacts from multiple sources of pollution and other social conditions. The county's youth were also identified as being more burdened by the system because they will live with impacts of the solid waste management decisions made today. The waste industry, large waste generators, residents in single family homes, and product manufacturers were identified as benefiting from the current system.

Community cohort members and other stakeholders were asked during listening sessions to further consider who is burdened and who has benefited. There was agreement with the initial assessment of who is most burdened by the current system and who is currently benefiting from it. Residents who spoke English as a second language, had limited space for collection, and had limited transportation options were also mentioned as more burdened by the system. Additionally, participants noted that those who benefit, including product manufacturers and large waste generators, aren't doing enough to reduce and better manage materials while those most burdened don't have equitable access to waste programs.

### Community engagement

Design of the communication engagement process for the plan was guided by the understanding of who is currently burdened by the solid waste system. To center the voices of those burdened and traditionally left out of the decision-making process, the county contracted with 18 community groups representing many diverse county communities to develop engagement plans for their communities, host community listening sessions, and communicate updates to their members on the process and feedback opportunities.

County staff also sought feedback and help with promoting engagement opportunities through established county engagement networks, including the Trusted Messengers and Community Engagement Community of Practice.

### Developing strategies for racial equity

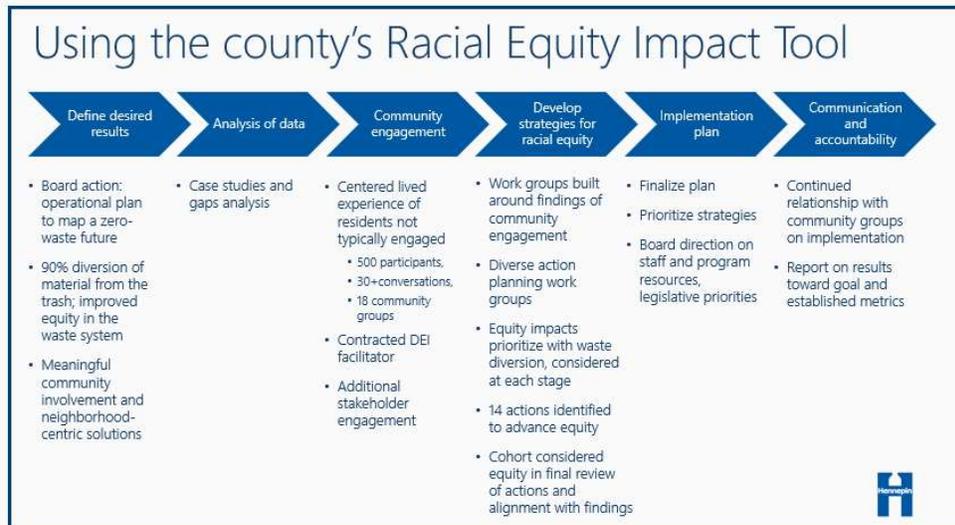
With the help of the facilitator, the community group cohort met 11 times to collaborate, gain a broader understanding of the solid waste system, provide input on the process, develop community-identified solutions, and define themes for use in the subsequent plan development phase. Meeting with the community group cohort throughout the process provided staff and consultants the opportunity to check in at multiple points in the process and adjust based on the cohort's feedback.

The ideas and themes that emerged from their community engagement efforts provided the foundation for the action planning work group structure and initial list of actions to consider. Many representatives from the cohort organizations participated in the action planning process.

## Implementation, communications, and accountability

Once the draft actions were refined, they were presented to the community group cohort to ensure they both aligned with the themes that emerged from their community conversations and addressed issues identified by their communities. Their feedback provided clarity on the actions and informed elements in the plan focused on the last two steps of REIT: implementation and communication and accountability.

The following graphic provides additional detail on the various stages of the REIT process and steps taken in each stage to develop the plan utilizing the tool.



# Phase 1: Listen and learn

## January through May 2022

The first phase of the development of the county's Zero Waste Plan included research on the county's solid waste system, community engagement, and conversations with industry stakeholders. Research on the county's solid waste system included a baseline assessment, gaps analysis, and comparative scan of six zero-waste leaders.

## Research on Hennepin County's solid waste system

The second step of the REIT process is to look at the data and what it can tell us about inequities. A review of Hennepin's solid waste system found that progress toward higher recycling rates has been slow. Despite a wide array of progressive policies and programming, the county has been unable to significantly increase its waste diversion rate for years. During the engagement process, county staff, consultants, and community cohort members shared information about the solid waste system. This background information provided participants with insight on the current system and helped stimulate discussions about the actions needed to make progress toward zero waste.

## How much waste do we generate?

Waste generation in Hennepin County increased 5% in 2021 to 1.3 million tons of waste, or about 64,500 tons more than in 2020. Based on statistical modeling by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, the county estimates that about 1.61 million tons of materials will be generated by 2030, a 23% increase from 2021.

Of the total waste generated in 2021, 508,451 tons (39% of the total waste generated) were recycled or composted. The remaining 61% of municipal solid waste is disposed of in regional landfills or the county's waste-to-energy facility, also known as the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC). In 2021, the HERC received just under half of the waste disposed of as trash, or 354,436 tons of material. Three privately owned landfills in neighboring counties received the other half of Hennepin County's trash.

## What materials are still in our trash?

Organics are the single biggest opportunity for reducing and diverting waste. Approximately 25% of what is being disposed of today is organic material, which includes food waste and other compostable materials. Additionally, 15% is recyclable and 20% is other specialty or hard-to-recycle materials such as mattresses, carpet, building materials, and furniture. This adds up to about 350,000 tons of organics and 210,000 tons of recyclables annually that could potentially be diverted. If, for example, 50% of this material was captured and recovered, the county's diversion rate would be closer to 70%. To get to 90%

or more waste diverted, the county will need to divert, reduce, or otherwise prevent the disposal of nearly 575,000 additional tons of material per year.

Waste sort studies show there is still a lot of trash in the waste stream, meaning there is not currently viable recovery options for those materials. This waste represents 40% of the waste generated and includes pet waste, diapers, menstrual products, and nonrecyclable plastics. Addressing this portion of the waste stream will be critical to reaching a 90% diversion rate.

Review the [Baseline Assessment report](#).

## Gaps analysis

An analysis of the gaps in Hennepin’s system revealed areas for improvement. The analysis reviewed collection, processing, end markets, education and outreach, policy, and partnerships.

### County successes and areas for improvement

	Successes	Areas for improvement
<b>Collection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curbside services – trash, recycling, organics</li> <li>• Drop-offs</li> <li>• Consistent single stream</li> <li>• Multifamily and business grants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service costs</li> <li>• Open hauling</li> <li>• Multifamily &amp; business</li> <li>• Equitable access – drop-offs</li> </ul>
<b>Processing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disposal facilities</li> <li>• Transfer stations</li> <li>• Drop-offs/ HHW</li> <li>• MRFs/ compost facilities</li> <li>• Construction/demolition material facilities</li> <li>• Processing capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reuse infrastructure</li> <li>• Organics processing</li> <li>• Equitable distribution</li> </ul>
<b>Education and outreach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent guidelines and other resources</li> <li>• Social marketing and channels</li> <li>• Green Partners education grants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools, multifamily, businesses</li> <li>• Equitable access – messages, messengers</li> </ul>
<b>Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solid waste fees</li> <li>• Hauler licensing</li> <li>• Recycling requirements (Ordinance 13) for cities, multifamily, food generators</li> <li>• State level statutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pay as you throw, service cost</li> <li>• Producer responsibility</li> <li>• Market development</li> <li>• State level statutes</li> </ul>
<b>End markets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local markets</li> <li>• Regional markets</li> <li>• Material transportation</li> </ul>	<p>Markets needed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organics</li> <li>• Construction/demolition materials</li> <li>• Reuse</li> <li>• Plastics</li> <li>• Textiles</li> </ul>
<b>Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• City and county collaboration</li> <li>• State grant funding</li> <li>• Local stakeholder groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manufacturers/brands</li> <li>• Private funding</li> <li>• Contract innovations</li> <li>• Community-led initiatives</li> </ul>

Some of the key findings of the gaps in the county's solid waste system include:

- Collection service costs don't go far enough to disincentivize trash disposal.
- The open market system for waste hauling results in inequities, inefficiencies, and environmental impacts.
- Increased awareness and consistent enforcement of multifamily and commercial recycling requirements is needed.
- Organics recycling and options for harder-to-recycle items are not commonly available at multifamily properties.
- Access to drop-off sites isn't equitable.
- More investment in reuse and repair businesses and facilities is needed.
- Additional organics processing capacity is needed.
- There are no landfills in Hennepin County, and metro capacity is limited.
- Awareness of the county's resources and programs is low, especially for multifamily residents, property managers and businesses.
- More culturally relevant messaging and messengers are needed.
- There are few state policies focused on circularity or producer responsibility.
- There are no mandates on construction and demolition waste disposal, and the county has no authority when it comes to building codes or regulating this waste.
- More end markets are needed for organics, some building materials, plastics, and textiles.
- Partnerships with the private sector and community groups should be leveraged to a greater extent.

Access the full [Hennepin County Gaps Analysis report \(PDF\)](#).

## Community scan

To assist the county in envisioning potential system design options and implications, the project team performed a global scan of circular systems and zero-waste management to create profiles of success. The comparative locations were identified in consultation with Hennepin County staff and were chosen due to their programs, policies, demographics, and geographies.

The researched locations included:

- **Alameda County Stop Waste, CA:** Solid waste management authority covering 14 cities and two sanitary districts, responsible for supporting members in addressing and managing materials.

- **King County, WA:** County solid waste system with over 30 cities, county has a zero-waste target and is focused on increasing equity for residents, end market development, and circularity.
- **Rotterdam, Netherlands:** The city is on track or ahead of every goal set by the European Union for recycling and organics management.
- **San Jose, CA:** One of the 10 most populous cities in the U.S., the city uses contracts, incentives, processing technologies, and other actions to achieve high rates of waste diversion.
- **Toronto, ONT:** Largest metropolitan area in Canada, focused on circularity, organics recovery programs, and multifamily programs to increase waste diversion.
- **Washington, DC:** High density jurisdiction with aggressive policies, high proportion of residents in multifamily housing, mix of affluent and less affluent residents, and a focus on equity in sustainability planning.

## Strategies from high performing communities

The following themes emerged from the research into the six communities that Hennepin County can learn from when planning their zero-waste efforts:

- Producer responsibility is a focus to reduce waste and make materials produced easier to recycle.
- Supporting a regional, circular economy with local end markets, small businesses focused on reuse and reduction, and neighborhood-based solutions helps to reduce waste and advance equity.
- Mandates, requirements, and bans are common to increase participation and diversion.
- Equity is a focus to ensure programs do not perpetuate existing disparities and increase access and equitable opportunities.
- There are a variety of solutions to address challenges with diversion and participation in multifamily settings, but no single solution has proven most effective.
- Construction and demolition waste programs and requirements are a part of many jurisdiction's services.
- Control over the system and how materials are collected is advantageous.
- Emphasis on food waste reduction and recovery of organic materials is an important part of zero-waste efforts.
- Mixed waste processing is being used or considered for organics and non-recyclables.
- Innovations in engagement and outreach are being pursued to increase participation and ensure equity.

Access the [Comparative Scan summary report \(PDF\)](#).

## Community engagement

Community engagement is a critical component of the REIT process. Hennepin County's Zero Waste Plan centered community voice using a robust community engagement process with prioritizing equity and disparity reduction.

During the first phase of community engagement, the county sought to understand the community's experiences and concerns with the solid waste management system and learn their priorities and ideas for solutions. To gather that feedback, the county worked with a cohort of community groups from February through April 2022 to hold conversations with residents who have traditionally been left out of the solid waste planning process, gathered responses through a variety of online engagement tools, and met with industry stakeholders.

## Community conversations

Community engagement was conducted by the 18 contracted community groups and centered the lived experience of 500 residents. These community groups held 31 conversations with residents. Although demographic information wasn't gathered at these meetings, these groups represent the following affinities:

- Cultural affinity: African American, Hmong, Lao, American Indian, Oromo, Somali, and Thai
- Geographic affinity: Neighborhood-based organizations in north, northeast, southeast, and south Minneapolis, Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, and St Louis Park.
- Service-based affinity: Faith, youth empowerment, social services, environmental and justice advocacy, urban agriculture, and clean energy.

The keys findings from these conversations included:

- **Equitable access and participation**

The community expressed that environmental justice is racial justice and the county must ensure that overburdened communities don't continue to get more burdens. Participants expressed that lived experiences, including with recycling and waste management, vary dramatically across racial, gender, and class lines. Additionally, consider how proposed actions will impact the most vulnerable communities, including those with disabilities and elders.

Recycling and organics recycling services need to be easier and more widely available, especially in multifamily settings. Currently, multifamily residents don't have access to as many services, and many residents aren't aware of existing recycling services. There is often a struggle with overflowing dumpsters, recycling collected incorrectly (such as recycling placed in plastic bags), and trash and recycling getting mixed together.

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*"Not having access to all the bins needed to separate garbage from recycling gets in the way of recycling more."*

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- **Consistent and relevant messaging, marketing, and educational programming**

There is currently a lot of confusion about recycling in communities. People aren't sure what recycling services are available to them, what the bins are for, and what they can recycle. Communities need to hear messages that will resonate with them delivered by relevant messengers. For example, some people said zero waste won't resonate in their community because it doesn't feel attainable for them.

*"Recycling is difficult when you don't know what to recycle."*

Participants suggested using better and clearer signage on bins, creating videos showing people how to recycle, and using games and creative graphics to appeal to youth.

They also stressed that employees in the waste management system, including with cities and haulers, need to listen and respond to resident questions and concerns.

- **Incentives to reward people for doing the right thing**

Residents said we need to incentivize recycling and reward good behavior rather than penalizing bad. They said it doesn't make sense to have people pay for recycling, especially in low-income areas. They also suggested offering incentives for getting involved in keeping the community clean, such as emptying public bins or cleaning out storm drains. Suggested incentives include gift cards and discounts on bills.

*"Incentives! Get caught disposing of your trash properly."*

- **Funding for collaborative efforts across neighborhoods to build communities**

Participants in the conversations were motivated to learn and change behaviors and were interested in collaborating with others to create a cleaner and healthier community. They were interested in having funding and technical assistance available to implement neighborhood-based solutions.

*"How do we help these different community-based organizations to partner, not only during the plan development but also in implementation?"*

One solution suggested was having recycling captains in neighborhoods and buildings that are paid a stipend to meet and educate new tenants, conduct education, improve services, and manage issues. People were also interested in youth leadership opportunities and employment as well as neighborhood accountability groups.

- **Concerns about HERC's impact on the surrounding community**

People want more information on the health impacts of the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) and who is most impacted. Some people said they want HERC shut down or moved to eliminate the health impacts and free up space for development to ideally replace HERC with something that is community controlled and regenerative. Additional insights on what was heard about HERC can be found beginning on page 23.

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*"The HERC should be moved, especially with people's health in this area. And the city is getting more heavily populated. It's not improving. More trash, more lungs to hurt. Needs to be gotten rid of."*

- **Continued community engagement in the process to ensure transparency and accountability**

Overall, the community groups said this process was a valuable opportunity for neighborhoods and other community-based organizations to come together, receive quality education about waste management, share ideas, and make commitments to do more. They appreciated the diversity of the group and being able to learn together and identify solutions. They said the community conversations were helpful for participants to get their questions answered and meet neighbors.

Many wanted to know what happens next. They wanted to know how the information was going to be used and if it would actually change things. They wanted to see a Zero Waste Plan developed that includes the community's voices and creates something that works for everyone – that is cost-effective, time-effective, and accessible for everyone. They also wanted more time as many thought the process moved too fast.

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*"How is this information gonna be used to change things? And how are things going to be different for our communities?"*

They said the county should be honest about the challenges of getting to zero waste. They felt a bigger investment is needed by state and local governments to make this initiative successful. They wanted to understand how tax dollars are used and why waste management is an extra fee.

They said space is needed for residents to share insights and report back on their experiences as changes are being made. They suggested offering more training, conversations, and education in the community, such as at churches, apartment buildings, schools, and with neighborhood groups. They were also interested in more data, especially at the neighborhood level, on key metrics.

- **Hold producers, businesses, and property managers responsible**

People said recycling services and zero waste solutions need to be made easier, and the responsibility needs to be taken off individuals. They said companies creating packaging in the first place should be held more accountable. Businesses and suppliers should be required to reduce packaging and use sustainable packaging, and they should face taxes or fines if they don't. They also wanted property managers to be held responsible for providing effective services and to face taxes or fines if they don't.

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*Address the actual root of the problem - over production and consumerism... even with the best ideas, we are just getting pummeled by fossil fuels and production. There's only so much you can do.*

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Review a [summary of the community conversations \(PDF\)](#) and [the full report from the community conversations \(PDF\)](#).

## Online engagement

The county also used a new online engagement platform, [beheardhennepin.org](http://beheardhennepin.org), to gather feedback from the general public. In total, 457 site visitors contributed their experiences and interests in reducing waste and recycling more in a variety of ways. The participants that offered feedback online reflected the audience we typically engage through our environmental communications. Most respondents said they are white, identify as female, and are between 25 and 64 years old. We heard from residents of 29 cities in Hennepin County, with 51% of respondents living in Minneapolis. Key findings from the online engagement included:

- **More recycling options are needed**

The majority of respondents said recycling is very important and they recycle everything they can. Respondents said they are satisfied or somewhat satisfied with recycling services available, but they said more materials accepted in their recycling at home would be the most important thing to help them recycle more. Common items they want more options for include organics recycling, plastic bags and wrap, textiles, batteries, and scrap metal.

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*"Between food packaging and buying household items, everything seems to come in extra plastic. Super hard to know how to recycle the various pieces."*

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- **Plastics are the most confusing and frustrating**

Respondents said they find plastic packaging and to-go containers from restaurants to be the most confusing to recycle. Respondents wanted more options for recycling and avoiding plastics, especially single-use plastics, and wanted to see businesses make it easier for consumers to avoid plastics.

- **Hold businesses accountable for the materials they create, especially packaging**

When asked what actions the county should make a priority to reduce waste, many respondents said businesses should be held accountable for the materials they produce. They explained that

there is only so much they can do as an individual, and the current system makes it impossible to avoid some types of waste. They especially focused on the need to reduce or eliminate packaging and single-use plastics.

- **Change the cost structure and offer incentives**

People wanted to see the cost and incentive structure for waste management change to emphasize recycling over trash. They wanted to see the cost for trash go up and the cost for recycling and organics recycling be subsidized or offered for free. They also suggested offering incentives for recycling, organics recycling, composting, and reducing waste.

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*“Create ways to incentivize both waste haulers and citizens to throw less away. Either through the carrot (reduced property tax/fee to haulers) or stick (start to ban certain items, like plastic bags and other similar).”*

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- **Increase education and outreach**

People said education is needed on a variety of topics, including what is accepted for recycling, how to recycle, how to reduce waste and buy less stuff, how to do organics recycling and composting, why recycling is important, and the environmental impacts of trash. They called for broad advertising campaigns, local outreach through community organizations and neighborhoods, and messaging that made recycling fun and cool.

- **Focus on better consumption and reuse over recycling**

Several people want the county to focus on better consumption and reuse over recycling. They said a cultural shift is needed to focus on buying less, investing in high quality goods, buying used goods, repairing items, and donating or otherwise reusing instead of putting things in the trash.

Review a complete summary of the [online engagement findings report \(PDF\)](#).

## Industry stakeholder engagement

Conversations were held with 170 industry stakeholders representing processors, haulers, environmental advocates, construction and demolition businesses, multifamily properties, small and large businesses, the reuse industry, and others to understand major obstacles, gaps, and opportunities for the county to achieve zero waste. Approximately one-third of participants didn't provide demographic information. Of those who did, 10% were people of color. Overall, a broad spread of ages was represented, including younger audiences with 15% of participants aged 18 to 29. The key findings from these conversations included:

- **Zero waste is supported, and urgent action is needed**

Stakeholders support the goal of zero waste but acknowledged it would take significant time, effort, and investment to achieve. Given that, they said the county should act urgently. They said the biggest benefit is the opportunity for the county and its residents to maximize the use of resources while reducing waste.

- **The current system is not equitable**

The current solid waste management system places unfair economic burdens and costs on some communities, results in uneven access to services and opportunities, and creates pollution that unfairly impacts certain communities and neighborhoods. Conversely, stakeholders reported that the solid waste industry, large corporations, and affluent neighborhoods and homeowners benefit from the current system. They said that increasing access to programs and services and offering financial support or other programs for lower income residents will help to reduce some of these burdens and inequities.

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*"Need to focus equally or more on requiring manufacturers to change design/distribution etc. And people like stuff."*

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- **Barriers to zero waste need to be addressed**

Address several key barriers in order to achieve zero waste, including: the need for significant behavior change; packaging that is designed for single use and is hard to recycle or reuse; lack of knowledge and need for increased education and engagement on recycling; and costs and amount of funding needed to be successful.

- **Solutions include infrastructure and policies**

Stakeholders described the role the county can play in developing and maximizing infrastructure and specific policies needed that hold producers responsible for the materials they make, create economic incentives and rebates, establish disposal bans and diversion requirements, and make programs mandatory.

Review a complete summary of the [industry stakeholder engagement findings \(PDF\)](#)

## Phase 2: Draft actions

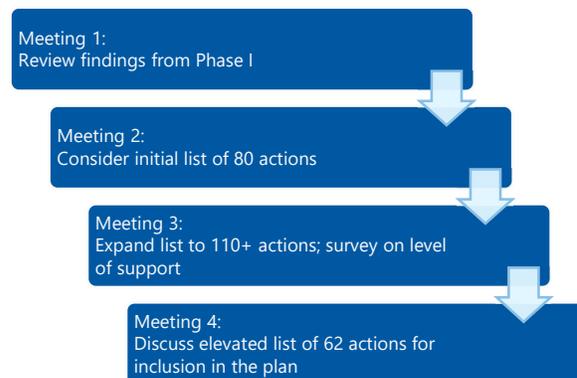
### June through September 2022

In Phase 2, community members and industry stakeholders were recruited to participate in action planning work groups to develop and consider actions to get Hennepin County to zero waste. Action planning work groups formed around seven themes that were developed based on the priorities, challenges, and ideas for solutions heard during the first phase of engagement:

1. Equity and Access
2. Policy
3. Neighborhood Solutions
4. Advancing Circularity
5. Systems and Infrastructure
6. Green Streams (organics)
7. Blue Streams (recycling)

Through four virtual meetings, work group members explored and refined more than 100 zero-waste actions proposed through the engagement sessions. This approach provided space for having discussions about the actions, sharing supplemental data to help make decisions, and facilitating a two-step voting process that elevated more than 60 zero-waste actions for final consideration in the Zero Waste Plan.

### Action planning process



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Meeting 4, reactions and feedback on the actions was collected through online chat final comment period. The feedback was considered by RRS as they further analyzed refined the proposed actions based on their ability to advance equity and impact on diversion. Below is a sample of the feedback gathered at the final meeting of the planning work group.

Sample of comments gathered at the final meeting of the action planning work groups

<i>"Would like to see an emphasis on preventing wasted food over composting"</i>	<i>"Construction is such a big contributor to our waste that it makes sense to have a focus on it."</i>	<i>"Love the community ownership of spaces - more community hubs are positive!"</i>	<i>"It's good to see a balance here of enforcement, engagement and collection."</i>	<i>"Yea for zero waste packaging, although I'm skeptical county can influence that."</i>	<i>"Closure of the HERC is a 100% necessary step for the county to take in order to properly move to a zero-waste system."</i>
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A total of 167 people participated in the work groups, bringing a wide range of expertise and perspectives to the meetings. The vast majority were residents of Hennepin County. About one-third of participants work for a business, industry or institution in Hennepin County or a business outside of the county that receives waste from the county. One-fifth of participants were trained Master Recyclers/Composter volunteers, and one-sixth worked for a local government or state agency. Almost half of the members provided a unique description of their relevant experience, including retired professionals in the environmental industry, reuse retailers, local environmental commissioners, professor, researchers, and residents seeking to get to zero waste.

Although work group members tended to be predominantly white (78%) and female (66%), efforts to be more inclusive were successful in bringing in voices traditionally underrepresented in solid waste planning. Community group cohort organizations continued to be involved by recruiting 19 participants from six of their organizations. Participants in the work groups were 10% Black, 4% Indigenous or American Indian, and 8% other people of color. In addition, 5% of members described themselves as non-binary or a third gender. Overall, a broad spread of ages was represented, and the team was successful in reaching younger audiences, with 15% of members aged 18 to 29.

Review the [memo \(PDF\)](#) with the elevated list of actions and summary of the final survey results.

## Phase 3: Review

### **October and November 2022**

After the action planning works groups wrapped up, RRS further analyzed and refined the proposed actions based on their ability to advance equity and impact on waste diversion. Part of this analysis included recommending additional actions to address any remaining gaps to ensure a comprehensive Zero Waste Plan. The draft actions were then presented to the community group cohort for feedback, which was incorporated into the [Draft Actions Summary](#).

With direction from the county board, the draft actions will be shared broadly for public feedback for inclusion in the final Zero Waste Plan, which is expected to be completed in early 2023.

# Hennepin Energy Recovery Center in the zero-waste planning process

In seeking an operational plan to get to a zero-waste future, the county board requested a community engagement process to bring people together to have discussions about achieving a zero-waste future that eliminates the need for the Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) and landfills. Commissioners also discussed how the process should provide space for residents to express their concerns about HERC.

The community groups were asked to host a series of community conversations to explore how residents manage waste now, identify barriers and benefits to reducing waste and recycling more, learn more about the waste system, and discuss what is working and could be improved with the current system. Some groups chose to further explore the topic of HERC as a part of their community conversations. The following is summary of the concerns voiced in these sessions about HERC.

- **Environmental and health impacts**

Some residents relayed concerns about the smoke from the stacks, the steam plume, and ash from the plant. They discussed elevated rates of asthma and cumulative health impacts in north Minneapolis, and said they believe HERC is a key factor in the health disparities that exist.

HERC is also seen as a symbol of many racial and environmental injustices that have not been addressed. Residents expressed frustration that there has been little mitigation of harm despite decades of concern. In these discussions, there was a call for shutting down HERC.

- **Transparency and trust**

There is a desire for more information and transparency about HERC's operations and information on who is affected most by HERC. At the same time, some residents expressed a distrust of Hennepin County staff associated with HERC; therefore, not all residents trust the data that has been shared. Additionally, some feel the community is not taken seriously regarding their concerns about HERC, especially compared to experts. They suggested independent, trusted sources of information were needed and that this information be made accessible to the public.

- **Alternatives and timeline**

Another sentiment expressed was the need to establish a timeline for shutting down HERC as a way to spur investments into more sustainable waste-prevention actions. Some community members believe that the county's motivation is to keep feeding the burner. Those concerned are seeking a date to hold the county accountable to advancing zero-waste work. Without a timeline, some residents are concerned that zero-waste actions will not be prioritized. Others expressed a desire for a phase out approach where zero-waste strategies are aligned with a future closure to HERC.

Opportunities to redevelop the HERC site into something that the community wants and needs was also discussed.

### Proposed actions to address HERC's role in the solid waste system

Concerns about HERC carried over to the action planning process. HERC was discussed in several of the seven action groups. The Equity and Access and Systems and Infrastructure work groups further refined and elevated the following strategies related to HERC for consideration in the final Zero Waste Plan:

- Evaluate HERC upgrades to reduce impacts on community in short term
- Establish milestones to phase out the use of HERC as county approaches zero waste
- Provide more information about HERC and the impact to the surrounding community

### Work group feedback on proposed HERC actions

The action to establish milestones to phase out HERC was selected to be included in the Zero Waste Plan. About 50% of the work group members supported this action and 15% opposed this action. Some work group members said they believe that landfills are superior to incineration, while others expressed that incineration was a better option than landfills. Others didn't feel informed enough to offer an opinion or expressed the argument doesn't matter until we get much closer to not needing either option.

The action to evaluate upgrades at HERC was also selected by the action planning work groups to be included in the Zero Waste Plan. About 75% of the work group member supported this action and 12% opposed this action. Some members thought this action was to minimize pollution and understand what was possible for additional pollution control. Others liked the idea of how the infrastructure could be used to recover more recyclables. Some members expressed any additional investment into HERC would be a mistake. Others expressed anything other than shutting down HERC immediately was an injustice and the opposite of advancing equity.

The action to provide more information about HERC and its impact on the surrounding community was considered because it was a suggestion that came out of phase one engagement efforts. The Equity and Access work group further expanded and refined the action description to ensure data comes from a trusted sources and is accessible to the public. However, this action ultimately was not elevated out of the work group for consideration with the final list of proposed actions.

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