

# MADISON FOOD POLICY COUNCIL

## FOOD WASTE REDUCTION TASK FORCE

### Progress Report – October 2015

#### Background

In October 2014, the Madison Common Council directed the Food Policy Council to review best practices and provide recommendations to reduce food waste by August 2015. This document provides a progress report to the Food Policy Council and the Common Council on the issue of food waste reduction, provided by the Food Waste Reduction Task Force, a task force jointly commissioned by the Madison Food Policy Council and Dane County Food Council.



The task force has met monthly since to review current practices and plans of the city and county. It has also reviewed current encouraging practices in upstream waste reduction. The task force developed a survey for restaurants and grocery stores to learn more about patterns in waste and best practices amongst our area businesses.

The task force also spent much time in discussing one particular gap within food recovery efforts: recovery of prepared foods prior to going to waste. The task force developed a plan to pilot a coordinated effort to recover prepared food from one large event in the area.

#### Review of Current Practices

The City of Madison and Dane County have taken many steps to consider the impact of food waste on the entire waste system and implemented several programs that aim to reduce waste. Leaf and yard waste drop-off sites, available compost pick-up, expansion of the City's organic waste collection program, investment into biodigester exploration, are a few major examples. Unfortunately, in recent years due to mainly budgetary constraints, several of these programs ran into problems, delays, or were cancelled all together.

It is estimated that the average person wastes over 190 pounds of food each year. With over 240,000 people in the City of Madison alone, just simple math leads us to the sobering fact that tens of thousands of *tons* of once edible food ends up in the landfill. The City's organic waste collection program is a promising practice with over 500 households and 31 businesses participating. While the demand is certainly there for a large expansion of the program, resources are sparse and the practice of taking the currently collected organic waste to a facility in Oshkosh leaves a heavy carbon footprint.

The issue of collection is not the only glaring area in need of improvement. Tons of food is wasted during production and immediately after preparation, long before it ends up in households.

Many large events and large institutions try to donate some of the excess prepared food and these donations are very generous. However, the reality has been that there is more food donated than can be reasonably integrated into the system and much of it still goes to waste and ends up in the landfill. This happens for a variety of reasons: 1) the food is packaged in bulk containers and is only usable by meal sites and not by food pantries, 2) by public health and food safety standards the food must be consumed within 7 days of preparation, and 3) the quantities of leftover food overwhelm the system and even with the best distribution system local and regional meal sites cannot handle the amounts available.

### **Best Practices – Large event recovery effort**

Each year in early September, Epic holds its World Wide Users Group Meeting at its campus in Verona. Over 10,000 people attend this week long event to learn about and give input for improvements to Epic’s products. As with any large event, more food is prepared than is eaten and over the past Epic has donated this food to Community Action Coalition for South Central WI, Inc. (CAC) to be re-distributed to area emergency food providers.

The joint Dane County Food Council and City of Madison Food Policy Council Food Waste Reduction Task Force decided to take on the Epic food waste issue to see if a working partnership with multiple organizations can help reduce the amount of waste. The partners in this endeavor included CAC, Second Harvest Food Bank for Southern WI, Healthy Food for All, and Epic.

An initial meeting held in midsummer brought these partners to the table with the following outcome:

- Epic - Would work smarter to improve menus and amounts to reduce the amount of leftovers
- Second Harvest - Would take leftover entrees and meat dishes that Epic flash freezes and distribute them throughout their 16 county service area. Freezing stops the 7 day “use by” count until items are thawed which extends the distribution time.



- CAC - Continue to take other leftover items (sandwiches, desserts, salads, etc) and distribute them throughout Dane County through their normal distribution.
- Healthy Food for All - Would take targeted leftovers which lend themselves to re-packaging, repackage those items at FEED Kitchens into household size portions, freeze or cool the items as appropriate, and distribute them to area food pantries.

During the week of the event Healthy Food for All garnered a cadre of volunteers, held two four-hour repackaging events at FEED Kitchens, and re-packaged green beans, chopped broccoli, pasta salad, fruit salad, and deli meats that were recovered from leftover sandwiches. In all, about a thousand pounds of food was recovered and saved



from the landfill, including 90 pounds of deli turkey and 60 pounds of deli shaved beef. Items were cooled or frozen as needed and labeled with both ingredients and “use by” dates. The day after each of the packing events, Healthy Food for All distributed the items to local food pantries. As an example, St. Vincent de Paul Food Pantry in Madison received 200 deli containers of fresh cut fruit salad for distribution just before the Labor Day weekend.

### Survey data and findings

The task force developed a survey to send out to all area restaurants and grocery stores to determine common trends in waste and discover best practices. Over 30 restaurants and 5 grocery stores responded to the survey and here is a summary of the results:

- Bread, meat and vegetable trimmings, and post-consumer waste are the most common food waste items amongst respondents.
- A community-wide organic waste collection program (going to compost or biodigester or a combination) is highly demanded from both restaurants and grocery stores.
- Those already participating in the City’s organic waste collection program have noticed a substantial difference in the amount of waste going to landfill.
- Consumer habits are a driver of food waste, especially as it relates to preference for hot prepared foods and large portion sizes.
- Many businesses are already utilizing strategies to reduce waste, but consumer habits and limited infrastructure are large impediments to further reductions.

## **Preliminary Recommendations**

- ❖ Compost program expansion
  - Expansion of the organic waste collection program.
  - Establishment of a community composting program.
- ❖ Coordination for food recovery
  - Formal collaboration with stakeholders to rescue prepared food from major events and institutions.
  - Formation of a network to coordinate efforts and identify gaps.
- ❖ Collaborate with Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD) on biodigester
  - A partnership with MMSD may be the most financially viable solution to the establishment of a municipal biodigester for food waste and other products.
- ❖ Expansion of education for both consumers and businesses
  - Lack of education about portion size, food labeling, donation regulations, and existing charitable outlets all are major contributors to the food waste epidemic. The City and County can play vital roles in education efforts.

## **Conclusion**

Most of these preliminary recommendations have significant budget impact, at least a recalibration of current capital and operating efforts for both the City of Madison and Dane County. The Food Waste Reduction Task Force does not take the potential financial impact and policy implications lightly. In the interest of providing more data and budget detail on the recommendations, the task force is producing this interim report before it explores these further. The task force believes that it is in the best interest of the City and County to strongly consider the positive social, environmental, and financial impact that these recommendations would have on the region.