

**Testimony of Justin Wood
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New York City
Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management
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Thank you, Chair Nurse, and members of the Sanitation and Solid Waste Management Committee for the opportunity to speak at today's committee hearing. My name is Justin Wood, and I am the Director of Policy at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI).

Every time we shine a light on New York City's recycling and waste reduction systems, we find a disturbing retreat from the zero waste and pollution reduction goals that our government set only a few years ago. As we gather here during Climate Week, horrific flooding in Puerto Rico and Pakistan and severe drought conditions throughout much of the world are just one the constant signs that governments are not doing nearly enough to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – including the 12% of New York's emissions caused by burying and burning millions of tons of solid waste.

Especially for environmental justice communities near incinerators, landfills, and transfer stations, a recycling rate is much more than just a slogan or abstract goal.

Just eight miles from where we sit at City Hall, the Covanta Essex incinerator is burning 2,600 tons of solid waste every day in Newark - a city in which more than 26% of residents live in poverty, and about 75% of residents are Black or Latino. Much of this waste is recyclable, compostable, and unnecessary, and much of it comes from Manhattan. In just the last two years alone this facility has racked up 50 environmental violations including releases of opaque smoke, excessive CO2 emissions, and failing to follow safety protocols for hazardous waste.

In addition to the alarming decline in municipal recycling, we remain incredibly concerned by the chronically low recycling rate for the enormous waste stream generated by commercial businesses, including offices, restaurants, and retail stores. As of now there is little data available on how the private waste companies serving businesses perform, but the few signs we have are not good: for example, one of the largest private recycling and transfer facilities in NYC filed reports with

the state DEC showing a paltry recycling rate of 12% in 2021 – down from just 18% in 2019.

Finally, recycling and waste reduction programs can and should be a source of thousands of high-quality, family-sustaining green jobs in and near New York City. Studies show that recycling and composting create far more jobs than landfills, incinerators, and transfer stations. For example, the SIMS Municipal Recycling facility that processes much of NYC’s residential recycling stream in Sunset Park, Brooklyn employs more than 100 people with full health benefits and union representation. Investing in more effective waste diversion programs should go hand in hand with expanding and building these kinds of facilities and ensuring that they create career opportunities for the communities most negatively impacted by pollution from our current, export-to-disposal solid waste system.

We thank Chair Nurse and members of the Committee on Sanitation for continuing to exercise your oversight authority to look at both the root causes for this underperforming system, for your efforts to ensure robust implementation of existing laws and programs, and for advancing several key bills that would begin to turn the tide on our burgeoning waste problem.

Top priorities include:

- Passage of Intro 494, the bill being heard today, which mandates a comprehensive study of plastics in our waste stream and would appropriately involve the Mayor’s Office for People With Disabilities in this process.
- Amendment and passage of Intros 274 and 275 which would put the city’s Zero Waste by 2030 goal into law and require DSNY to report annually on progress toward this goal for all waste streams.
- Continuing Council oversight to ensure robust implementation of Local Law 199 of 2019 (Commercial Waste Zones). The upcoming ten-year contracts between the City and private sanitation companies have the potential to sharply increase recycling, composting, food donation, and waste reduction programs, and if sufficient incentives are “baked in” to the new system to reward businesses and waste companies that successfully reduce the amounts sent to landfills and incinerators. For example, Los Angeles’ contracts with private waste haulers include an enforceable goal to reduce disposed waste from each commercial zone by 65% from 2019 to 2025, and

contracted waste companies may be assessed damages in the future if they fail to meet annual targets.

- Introduce and pass Intro 559 the “Skip the Stuff” bill, which will help source-reduce the amount of single-use disposable plastics from restaurants in our residential and commercial waste streams.
- Finally, recycling of organic waste via composting and anaerobic digestion is a necessary complement to metal, glass, and plastic recycling, and investment in organics recycling systems, containers, and public education help reduce contamination of paper and other “dry” recyclables with food waste. We urge Speaker Adams to immediately pass Intro 244 which would mandate universal food scrap recycling by 2024 and has large majority support on the Council.

As ever, we are appreciative of this committee’s efforts to turn the tide on a rising sea of municipal waste which negatively impacts New Yorkers in so many ways, and we look forward to continuing to work with you to advance solutions.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

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