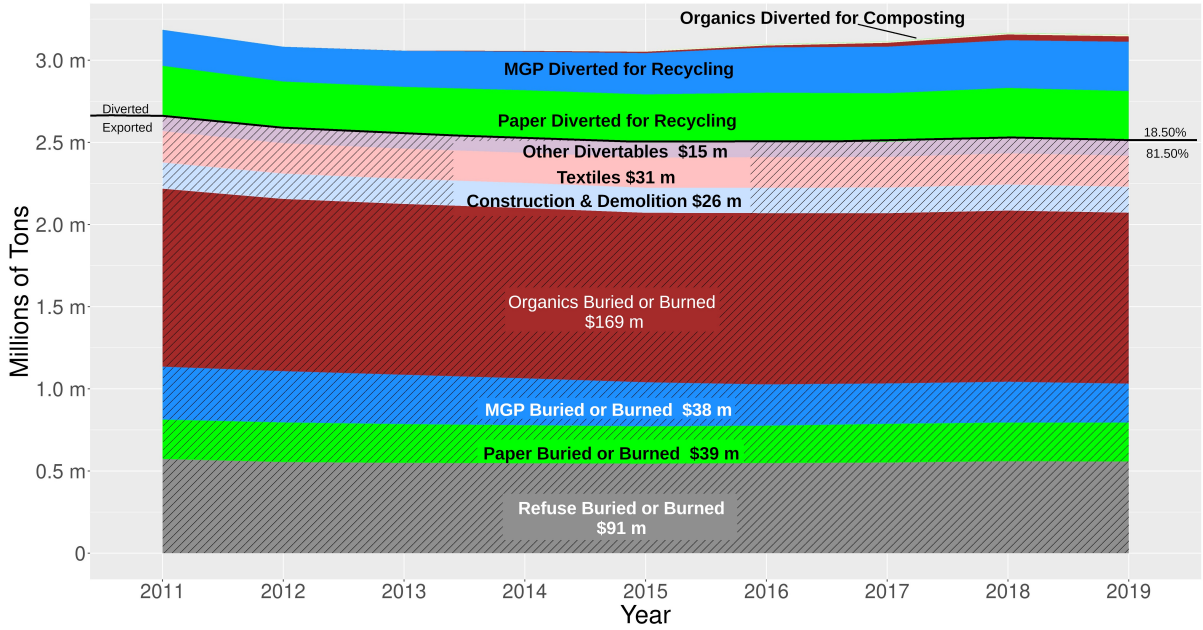
New York City Has Not Made a Long Term Commitment to Zero Waste

How The City Wastes Our Tax Dollars Incinerating and Landfilling Resources



New York City Waste Valuable Resources

In January of 2015, the City of New York announced its plan of sending zero waste to landfill and incinerators by 2030 (0x30).

As shown above, in 2019 the majority of the City's exports to landfill and incinerators were in fact recyclable (paper, metal, glass, plastic, and organics).[1] The City should have received revenue from these resources; instead, it paid $329 million to bury and burn them and incurred environmental costs of air pollution, water pollution, and the resulting climate change and environmental degradation.[2]

New York City's 2019 exports of solid waste to landfill and incinerators:

- 41% of the exports were organic material.[3]
- $169 million price tag to export the organics instead of generating between $10-22 million from it as compost and renewable natural gas (according to the Independent Budget Office's study).[4-5]
- $160 million price tag to export paper, metal, glass, and plastic.[6]

The graph also shows that New York City's recycling rate has remained stubbornly at 18% for nearly a decade. The other 82% of the City's waste was sent to landfill and incinerators.[7]

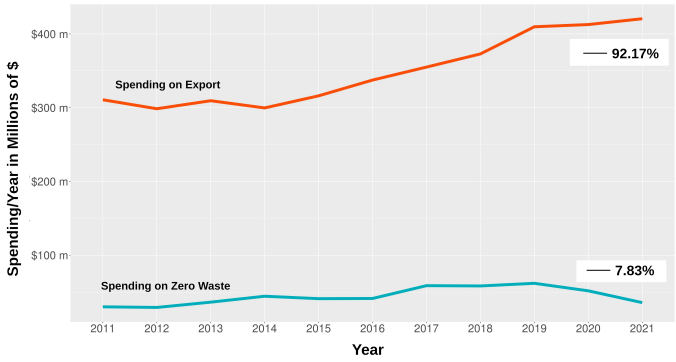
Export Costs Grow While Zero Waste Plummets

Alarmingly, since 2011, export costs have grown 35%, with most of the increase occurring since 2015. These costs will continue to rise as community opposition to landfills builds and available space decreases.[8]

When the City announced 0x30, it had already tied up $374 million a year in binding Long Term Waste Export contracts (lasting up to 30 years) preventing the release of budget money for zero waste programs to properly reuse, recycle and compost our resources.[9]

Instead of appropriately funding zero waste programs, in 2019 the City abandoned the 0x30 plan.[10]

Budgetary Commitment to 0x30[6]



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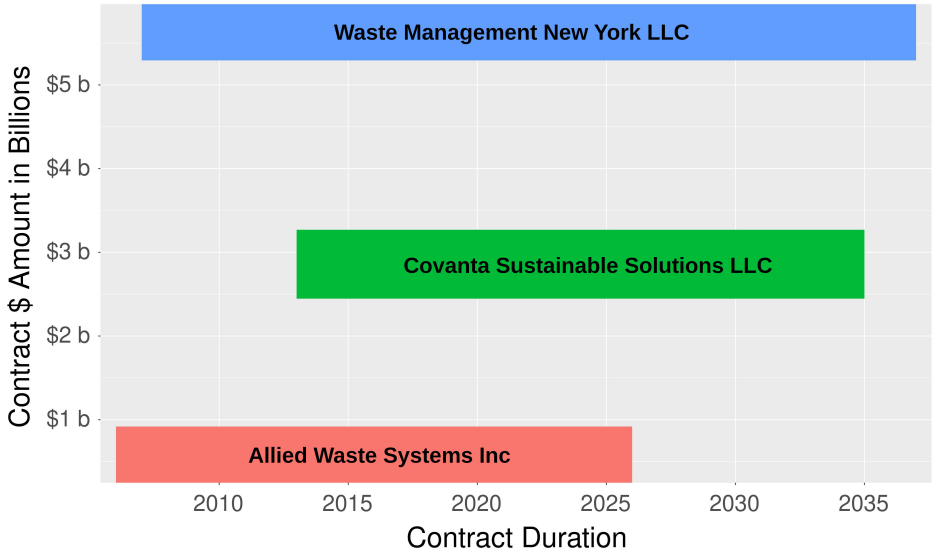
NYC's Commitment to Long Term Waste Export

The graph below illustrates the duration, in years, and aggregate budgetary commitment of the largest Long Term Waste Export contracts with three vendors. The total remaining commitment from 2020 to 2037 could be in excess of $6.8 billion.[11]

Largest NYC Long Term Contracts



The City Abandons its Last Solid Waste Management Plan

The 2006 New York City Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP) in the opening statement says:

> As a comprehensive planning document, this SWMP addresses the three distinct but interconnected areas that make up the City's solid waste management system: Waste Prevention and Recycling, Long Term Export and Commercial Waste."

Instead of focusing on Waste Prevention and Recycling initiatives that would have supported the 0x30 goal, the city's effort and funding has gone to Long Term Export and Commercial Waste.

For the 0x30 plan to have been successful, it should have had sufficient funding. The upward trend of City spending on Waste Export and the downward trend for zero waste spending shows:

- $456 million spent on Waste Export and 0x30 in FY2021[12]
- 92% of spending is for export to disposal[13]
- 8% is for 0x30[14]

More is being spent on export, and less is being spent on zero waste solutions than when the City committed to zero waste.

Best Practices to Transition NYC From Long Term Waste Export to 0x30

The City can still achieve its 0x30 plan if it takes the following actions:

- The City must not sign "Put or Pay export/ disposal contracts that penalize the City for maximizing Zero Waste
- City Council should legislate rigorous guidelines for the long term export contracts, including flexibility to maximize zero waste and a new form of export disposal contract that is more flexible -- with the ability to withhold (without penalty) reusable, recyclable and organic materials
- City Council should review existing contracts and provide commentary before DSNY renews or renegotiates them
- The City should create long-term contracts for organics processing and find local markets for biogas and agricultural uses
- City or state should measure organics going to landfills, pass bans on organics to landfills, annually measure methane emissions from landfills used by NYC/NYS

Foot Note Information & Dataset: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Mx50rJn__vI6zMm8WOf2FCa1b71XjUS8FfjEfJawm9E/edit?usp=sharing