

# FOCUS GROUP REPORT

## Collective Summary

Focus Groups Conducted from 5/16/24-7/2/24

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From May 16, 2024, to July 2, 2024, RRS conducted eight focus groups representing seven stakeholder groups in Fairfax County. Two sessions were conducted in person and six were conducted virtually via Zoom. All sessions were recorded and included a facilitator. The in-person sessions also included a note-taker and a Spanish/English interpreter.

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather feedback on zero-waste, recycling, food scrap composting, and other related waste reduction topics from the perspective of Fairfax County residents, businesses, organizations, and contractors to inform the County's update of its Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP) aimed at moving toward zero waste. Additionally, feedback on communication methods will help inform future outreach and education activities.

Participants were identified through collaborative outreach efforts by Fairfax County and RRS. The aim was to include representatives from each major stakeholder group in the County, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. All focus group participants either lived or worked in Fairfax County and would be impacted by any zero-waste strategies implemented as part of the updated SWMP.

An additional focus group representing local businesses was planned, but due to scheduling challenges, it was not completed before this report was finalized. Fairfax County and RRS are actively working to schedule this focus group by the end of July. Once completed, RRS will integrate the feedback from this session into the updated SWMP.

# PURPOSE

The County is updating its SWMP to move toward zero waste by improving the use of various waste reduction strategies. The County's goal is to ensure that draft strategies included in the plan are inclusive and responsive to the unique needs and perspectives of Fairfax County residents, businesses, organizations, and contractors. Focus groups allow for the gathering of feedback and opinions on zero-waste, recycling, food scrap composting, and other related waste reduction topics from Fairfax County commercial property managers.

# METHODOLOGY

## FOCUS GROUP CATEGORIES

RRS worked with the County to identify various stakeholder groups that impact or are impacted by the SWMP. Together they categorized these stakeholder groups into two tiers. Tier 1 groups are considered critical to developing approaches to implementing a zero-waste plan. These groups represent vulnerable populations and key stakeholders. These groups may face more challenges/difficulties in implementing or participating in zero-waste actions. Tier 2 groups are considered important to developing approaches to implementing a zero-waste plan. These groups represent non-vulnerable populations, education facilities, and elected officials.

## PARTICIPANTS

When selecting focus group participants, the aim was to include representatives from each major stakeholder group in the County, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. All focus group participants either lived or worked in Fairfax County and would be impacted by any zero-waste strategies implemented as part of the updated SWMP. It is important to note that some participants from the residential focus groups were avid recyclers and strong advocates for recycling and sustainability best practices. This was due to the selection process, as those who responded to the interest form already had a strong commitment to the topic. Consequently, perspectives gathered from these focus groups may not accurately reflect the broader population's view or behaviors regarding zero-waste practices.

Participants were identified through collaborative outreach efforts by Fairfax County and RRS. Initially, Fairfax County staff conducted outreach to potential participants. Following this, RRS managed the follow-up and scheduling of the focus group sessions. Generally, Fairfax County identified potential organizations or community groups that were influential within the stakeholder community, such as Homeowners Associations (HOAs), property management companies, various chambers of commerce, Building Owners and Managers Association (BOMA), and tourist information centers. These groups were contacted because their members could either directly contribute valuable insights to the focus group or connect us to additional participants. In cases where Fairfax County already had established connections with certain groups, these contacts facilitated session coordination and participant recruitment. All participants were required to sign and return a consent form before participating in the discussion.

## QUESTION DEVELOPMENT

The focus groups aimed to explore the potential challenges different stakeholders could face in adopting some of the draft zero-waste strategies and to identify opportunities for the County to address these concerns. Specifically, the County wanted to understand the challenges in implementing waste separation in various building settings, utilization of the Purple Can Club for glass recycling, obstacles sorting food scraps, transitioning to a Pay-as-You-

Throw (PAYT) and Unified Sanitation District (USD) models, and education and outreach. To achieve this, RRS in collaboration with the Fairfax team developed targeted questions that were unbiased and open-ended, allowing focus group participants to freely express their spontaneous and unfiltered opinions.

### **SITE SELECTION**

The objective was to find a convenient and accessible meeting time and location for participants. This involved either incorporating the focus group session into existing scheduled meetings or scheduling a new meeting that was accessible and convenient for participants. Ultimately, RRS leveraged one existing virtual meeting (Haulers, conducted on May 16), held two in-person meetings at the Opportunity Neighborhood locations (Vulnerable Communities, conducted on May 24 and June 20), and scheduled the remaining meetings virtually based on participants' availability.

### **FACILITATIONS**

Of the eight focus group sessions, two were conducted in person at the Opportunity Neighborhood locations (Vulnerable Communities), and six were conducted virtually via Zoom. The in-person meetings were audio recorded and included a facilitator, a note-taker, and a Spanish/English interpreter. The virtual meetings were video recorded, with the facilitator also taking notes. The recordings were transcribed either through Otter.ai or automatically via Zoom.

## **DISCUSSION RESULTS**

### **TOPIC 1: ENVISIONED WASTE MINIMIZATION SCENARIO**

The responses from focus group participants paint a collective vision of an ideal Fairfax County where waste generation is minimized through informed, proactive actions, comprehensive education, community collaboration, and technological advancements. Families demonstrate a commitment to waste reduction through practices such as recycling, composting, and source reduction, alongside a preference for local purchasing and reuse. They exhibit a strong understanding of proper waste disposal methods and recycling guidelines, actively engaging in environmental education. Local collaborations are seen as pivotal, fostering neighborhood-level initiatives and partnerships with businesses to streamline waste disposal and collection processes. Efficient waste collection systems utilize advanced, smart technologies and data-driven operations to monitor and optimize waste sorting across residential and commercial sectors. Robust infrastructure supports convenient waste separation in existing and future buildings, underpinned by county codes ensuring effective regulation and enforcement. Businesses prioritize staff training on waste sorting, supported by financial incentives for sustainable practices that are both economically viable and widely accessible for businesses. Fairfax County residents and businesses embrace sustainability initiatives with confidence, believing in their collective efforts to significantly reduce waste.

### **TOPIC 2: GENERAL RECYCLING AND PURPLE CAN CLUB**

Recycling attitudes and practices varied significantly among different stakeholder groups. For some residents, recycling is a personal responsibility driven by a desire for a sustainable future. These individuals avoid contaminants in waste streams and prioritize waste reduction at the source. Conversely, other residents face challenges with inadequate recycling infrastructure or lack motivation due to observed mixed waste collection practices by haulers. When deciding how to dispose of items, proactive recyclers consider compost, recycling, donation before trashing an item. In contrast, residents without sufficient infrastructure often comply with building requirements for waste sorting but may not invest much effort due to perceived indifference in waste treatment practices. Regarding glass recycling, some residents appreciated the Purple Can club, while many were unaware of the program or did not fully grasp its purpose or lacked convenient drop-off locations. Concerns were voiced

among all residents regarding accessibility and need for expanded drop-off options for glass and other recyclable materials.

Despite a lack of recycling infrastructure noted among some residents, all residential and commercial property managers offer recycling in their buildings, citing compliance with county regulations and tenant expectations. Managers prioritize recycling in their buildings to reduce waste, promote sustainability, and meet environmental goals. They participate in some tenant education and ensure accessible facilities to encourage participation. However, they underscored ongoing challenges such as tenant engagement, education gaps, inconsistent enforcement, and logistical issues with waste haulers. They advocated for enhanced service flexibility and sufficient resource allocation to address these concerns effectively.

Participants in the hospitality sector varied in their recycling practices from all recyclables excluding cardboard to only recycling cardboard, citing county mandates, recycling rebates, or discontinuation due to observed collection inconsistencies. Participants identified the education of guests and staff as a major challenge, along with the significant cost and infrastructure required to ensure correct sorting practices.

Overall, participants across all focus groups highlighted the critical need for enhanced recycling infrastructure, improved education, and clearer guidelines on waste disposal methods. They emphasized the need for robust enforcement mechanisms and called for increased education resources and training. Participants emphasized the importance of making recycling accessible, user-friendly, and financially viable for widespread adoption of sustainable practices. Businesses and property managers advocated for on-site recycling solutions and sought County support for initial capital investments and ongoing operational expenses.

### TOPIC 3: ORGANICS

Participants across various sectors highlighted significant challenges in implementing effective food scraps management. Key concerns include managing costs and logistical hurdles to prevent pest and odor issues and ensuring thorough training to minimize contamination. These challenges are compounded by space limitations and the need for specialized equipment in retail, food service, and office settings. Convenience and inclusivity were highlighted as essential for effective waste separation, with residents advocating for waste reduction educational campaigns and the establishment of convenient drop-off locations. Furthermore, it was suggested that the County should prioritize mastering existing residential recycling efforts before introducing new initiatives to avoid overwhelming residents with multiple changes simultaneously.

In the hospitality sector, participants noted that implementing food scraps separation in full-service restaurants is feasible but quick-service restaurants face greater challenges. Residential and commercial property managers' biggest concern was managing food scraps effectively, with suggestions for quick pick-up services, off-site decomposition options, and the establishment of satellite compost locations. Participants stressed the importance of county support, financial incentives, consistent hauler practices, clear educational materials, and clarity on the end use of composted materials to incentivize the adoption of food scrap recovery services by businesses.

Haulers approached the topic with a market-focused, technical perspective, emphasizing the critical importance of assessing the financial implications and market viability of expanding organics recycling services. They highlighted the substantial investments needed in equipment and infrastructure, stressing the necessity for taxpayer support to offset these costs effectively.

#### TOPIC 4: UNIFIED SANITATION DISTRICTS

Participants expressed diverse preferences and considerations regarding a USD model. Generally, residents benefiting from waste management services favored a county-managed approach, citing its potential for consistency, reliability, and robust enforcement of regulations to standardize service quality and pricing. In contrast, property and business managers, who currently manage these services, leaned towards maintaining independent contracts with haulers, valuing the control and flexibility they offer for tailored solutions and efficient issue resolution. While recognizing the potential benefits of county-managed contracts for integrated services and pricing consistency, concerns were raised about slower service issue resolution and potential monopolistic effects compared to direct hauler relationships. Effective communication and pricing transparency were underscored as crucial for the success of any county-managed service.

Haulers appreciated the current system's flexibility and consumer choice but acknowledged existing inefficiencies and challenges. They highlighted the complexities involved in effectively franchising commercial waste collection in the County due to its size and diversity. Any transition to a USD model would necessitate thorough consideration of its impact on service diversity, legal implications, and the specific needs of different communities. Haulers underscored the importance of significant infrastructure investments and prioritizing safety measures during any waste management transition.

#### TOPIC 5: PAY-AS-YOU-THROW

Both residents from vulnerable communities and residential property managers expressed skepticism about the practicality of implementing a tiered pricing system in multifamily buildings. Residents raised concerns over fairness in cost distribution and doubts about potential rent reductions, while property managers highlighted logistical complexities billing accuracy and resident compliance.

In contrast, participants from single-family and multifamily housing under an HOA supported the adoption of a PAYT cost model, recognizing its potential to encourage waste reduction behaviors. However, they also voiced apprehensions about managing unavoidable waste, preventing system misuse, and the potential financial impact on larger families, underscoring the need for robust management strategies and comprehensive community education.

#### TOPICS 6: RESIDENT EDUCATION

Residents across various housing types expressed diverse preferences and faced challenges in accessing reliable recycling and waste management information. Single-family and multifamily housing participants commonly use county or HOA websites but encounter frustrations with incomplete or conflicting information. There is a notable lack of trust in existing sources. In contrast, vulnerable community members demonstrated limited awareness of the County's solid waste resources, relying on alternative sources like family, local media, and property managers.

When educating residents, residential property managers prioritize move-in orientations, complemented by occasional email updates, in-person events, and signage in trash rooms and on waste bins. Commercial property managers predominantly use email communication with their tenants, occasionally supplementing with in-person events and signage on trash containers. In the hospitality sector, waste disposal information is primarily conveyed to staff due to operational constraints, utilizing training sessions, orientations, and pre-shift meetings to ensure thorough staff knowledge. Haulers emphasize real-time feedback mechanisms as effective tools for enhancing service delivery to their customers.

Overall, enhancing community engagement and understanding of recycling and waste management practices in Fairfax County requires improved accessibility, clarity, and diversity in communication channels.

## TOPICS 7: COUNTY COMMUNICATIONS

For communication intermediaries such as property managers, haulers, and hospitality professionals, email emerged as the preferred method for its clarity and documentation benefits when disseminating information to residents, tenants, and staff. However, participants highlighted additional effective communication methods the County could consider employing. Some emphasized the importance of sharing proactive tips on waste reduction, information about local sustainability initiatives, and information about financial incentives such as sustainability rebates or certification programs. Others recommended integrating waste management updates with in-person county inspections and underscored the value of hands-on educational initiatives and community involvement events. Haulers appreciated opportunities for open dialogue and collaboration with the County, seeking more opportunities to contribute feedback and help shape meeting agendas to enhance service delivery. Participants universally valued receiving prompt, informative responses from the County.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights gathered from the various focus group discussions, several key recommendations emerged to address various challenges and improve waste management practices in Fairfax County. These recommendations aim to offer actionable steps for the planning and communications teams to consider in its zero-waste plan:

- **Accessibility:** The County will need to ensure that all residential and commercial buildings are equipped with adequate recycling infrastructure—including sufficient bins and accessible drop-off points. The County may consider subsidizing costs for in-unit bins, additional dumpsters, and increased waste pickups to encourage widespread adoption and compliance among residents and businesses alike.
- **Infrastructure Development:** To enhance recycling and waste recovery efforts county-wide, comprehensive infrastructure development is crucial. The County should prioritize expanding and improving disposal options by increasing access to composting, recycling, and donation facilities across public areas. This expansion should prioritize communities with limited access to private transportation. The County may consider leveraging high-traffic locations like grocery stores as centralized hubs for waste management services—such as food scraps drop-off points and recycling stations. Furthermore, investing in new transfer stations and recycling centers will improve operational efficiency, reducing logistical challenges and enhancing overall service reliability.
- **Future Developments:** The County should establish proactive building requirements tailored to both commercial and residential properties. Specifications should mandate sufficient space for trash chutes, ample dumpster space, provisions within individual residential units for accommodating multiple waste containers, and space for concealed waste bins or containers in trash rooms.
- **Enforcement and Compliance:** The County should enhance enforcement through regular audits and collaboration with haulers to ensure that every building, both existing and new, provides accessible recycling containers and prohibits mixing trash with recyclables. The County should develop a robust regulatory code for waste management initiatives, incorporating clear requirements, procedural guidelines, and penalties for non-compliance. This code should include a phased introduction timeline and

establish a final implementation deadline. The County must clarify waste collection requirements with haulers and property managers to avoid misinformation and noncompliance.

- **Glass Recycling and Collection:** The County should maintain its existing drop-off Purple Can Club system for glass collection and avoid introducing separate curbside collection bins. Instead, it should expand drop-off locations in accessible public areas. The county should also explore alternative recycling technologies and enhance education and awareness campaigns to encourage responsible glass recycling within the current system.
- **Organics Waste Management:** Should the County implement a food scraps collection program, integrating it into existing waste and recycling services could simplify collection and management while addressing concerns about on-site pests and odor. Providing at-home bins, composting bags, dumpsters, and educational materials would ensure ease of participation. Collaboration with haulers and property managers is crucial to prevent organic waste from being mixed with regular trash, thereby sustaining resident engagement. Supporting local organics collection and composting initiatives, such as community gardens, could further enhance community involvement. The County should consider a pilot program before broader county-wide implementation to assess feasibility and cost-effectiveness. In the hospitality sector, prioritizing full-service restaurants initially and later expanding to quick-service establishments is advisable, considering the need for additional investments in infrastructure, staff training, and public education. Educating residents on at-home composting before scaling up to include quick-service restaurants would also foster familiarity with sorting processes and increase program success.
- **Strategy Implementation:** The County should exercise caution in rolling out new initiatives, particularly in communities where recycling infrastructure is inadequate or inaccessible. It is essential to prioritize the effective implementation of existing recycling practices before introducing additional initiatives such as composting. This phased approach will ensure that all residents have equitable access to sustainable waste management options and maximize participation in recycling efforts. Moreover, it is recommended that the County incorporate a financial incentive component to increase recycling participation.
- **PAYT:** Should the County implement a PAYT cost model program for multifamily and single-family housing, Fairfax County will need a robust waste tracking system to ensure accurate pricing and prevent contamination of recycling and organics bins. Quick lid flips by haulers can help detect contamination, with enforcement measures such as tagging non-compliant bins to ensure proper sorting. Transparent communication on pricing changes is essential to maintain resident trust. The County should also consider financial assistance programs for larger families and low-income households to support equitable participation. Additionally, considering that any reductions in individual unit rents may not significantly incentivize participation in multi-family housing, the County may want to provide alternative sustainability options for buildings to utilize the saved funds.
- **Unified Sanitation District (Franchised Hauler System):** Should the County implement a county-managed waste management system, they must ensure improved service quality and cost-effectiveness while avoiding monopolistic drawbacks and maintaining service standards. Dedicated resources should promptly address any issues, and transparent communication about cost impacts is crucial. Given Fairfax County's diversity and geographic size, careful consideration of operational complexity, particularly in the commercial sector, is essential due to the numerous variables and specialized needs involved.

- **Community Engagement:** Fairfax County should explore establishing neighborhood-specific advisory committees to foster localized information sharing and empower residents to become local influencers/ambassadors and neighborhoods to organize community-driven events. These initiatives can promote sustainable practices, including local composting and coordinated recycling efforts.
- **County Communications with Intermediaries:** The County should continue using email to communicate with businesses, property managers, and haulers, while supplementing these communications with additional strategies. This could include more in-person interactions such as hauler ride-alongs, integrating waste management updates with in-person county inspections, organizing hands-on educational initiatives, and hosting community involvement events. In addition to providing waste management updates, the County should disseminate sustainability rebate opportunities and certification program information, details on emerging technologies, proactive waste reduction tips and best practices, and opportunities for collaboration on local sustainability initiatives. The County should also consider expanding communication with haulers to allow for a more two-way channel, creating opportunities for open dialogue and collaboration. Lastly, the County should improve its responsiveness to questions from these stakeholders.
- **Resident Education:** The County should enhance its educational initiatives by providing comprehensive materials in multiple formats and languages, clearly communicating strategy guidelines and promoting waste reduction strategies. This includes collaborating with haulers and property managers for consistent and accurate information dissemination, utilizing diverse channels such as signage in high-traffic areas, online platforms, and in-person training and demonstrations. The County may also consider integrating waste reduction education into school curriculums and non-waste related materials, as well as providing resources and instructional materials for businesses. Materials should highlight the benefits of new initiatives and, when possible, include statistics to show the environmental and fiscal impact of efforts.