

Search Recent News Archives Web for

Philly.com

Today's Inquirer

Today's Daily News

[Back to Home](#) > [Editorials & Commentary](#) >

South Jersey Commentary

Posted on Fri, Mar. 16, 2007

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Front Page

US & World

Local & Regional

Pennsylvania

- Philadelphia
- Delaware County
- Montgomery County
- Chester County
- Bucks County

South Jersey

- Burlington County
- Camden County
- Gloucester County

Neighbors

Sports

- High School
- Outdoors

Business

- Tech.life

Editorials/
Commentary

- Currents
- Pennsylvania
- South Jersey

Columnists

Obituaries

Health & Science

Features

- Arts & Entertainment
- Books
- Daily Magazine
- Food
- Home & Design
- Image
- Travel
- Weekend

Real Estate

Religion

Education

- School Report Card

Corrections

Colleges can recycle food

By Jonathan Bloom

Colleges are charged with educating students on a broad range of topics. Teaching them how to waste food shouldn't be one of them.

Food is the most common material Pennsylvanians throw away, comprising 12 percent of the state's municipal waste stream. Pennsylvania squanders enough food annually to nearly fill Lincoln Financial Field. Local universities, many of which are now separating food from regular trash, provide hope for reducing that amount.

Food diversion - separating food waste from the trash stream either through wasting less, composting, or feeding livestock - brings environmental and economic benefits. When food decomposes in landfills, it increases emissions of methane, a greenhouse gas 21 times more harmful than carbon dioxide. Composting, by contrast, does not emit methane because the pile is turned, allowing oxygen into it. Also, excessive wet, heavy food waste in landfills can cause leaching into groundwater.

Diverting food from landfills helps schools' budgets. Educating students to limit waste saves money by reducing the trash weight; sending food to pig farmers costs about half what regular waste removal does. And composting fees are competitive with normal disposal. "It's gotten so efficient and effective to take everything to landfills," said Dan Garafalo, senior facilities planner at the University of Pennsylvania. "But you don't have to spend more money to do the right thing. That's why we're exploring more ecologically appropriate options like composting."

In April, the University of Pennsylvania will unveil its contribution to food recycling: two on-site composting machines that transform restaurant scraps into usable soil. The White Dog Café and three other restaurants in Penn-owned buildings near Moravian Street are now composting up to 150 pounds of their food waste daily.

In fiscal 2006, Penn sent more than 800 tons of food to the landfill - enough to fill the Palestra's court up to the backboards. Because much of that could be avoided or diverted, the school is now pondering alternatives. "From a cafeteria standpoint, we're considering Moravian Street an operational pilot to see if it is replicable on a larger scale," Garafalo said.

Temple University pays New Jersey pig farmer Bob Shisler to pick up cafeteria and hospital food waste, with two tons per day feeding Shisler's hogs instead of the waste stream. Shisler collected from Villanova University as well but stopped last year because

Photography**Special Reports****Interactive**

- Blogs
- Q&A Forums

Multimedia

he doesn't raise as many hogs now. While Villanova is examining other options, it now sends all its food waste into the regular waste stream.

Across the river, Rutgers University-Camden and Rowan University donate some of their leftover edible food to local soup kitchens but throw away the rest. Rutgers University's main campus is more progressive, deliquifying students' leftovers and kitchen scraps before pig farmer Steve Pinter collects them. The school is also experimenting with anaerobic digestion, a food-to-energy process at its EcoComplex in Columbus, N.J.

These universities have adopted strategies described by the Environmental Protection Agency in its Food Waste Recovery Hierarchy. The hierarchy ranks options in this order: waste less food, donate edible food to needy people, feed animals, compost. With their vast quantities of food, mobilized students and established recycling programs, college campuses could improve food diversion on a large scale.

Perhaps the simplest option of the hierarchy - wasting less - can be the hardest because it requires changing ingrained student behavior. In too many college cafeterias, the popular "all-you-can-eat" model becomes "all-you-can waste." At Rutgers' five cafeterias on its main campus in New Brunswick, the per-person food waste is more than a pound and a half per meal, said Jim Verner, facilities supervisor for Rutgers' Division of Dining Services. While Penn orally discourages wasting, Rutgers posts written discouragements. "We have signs telling them that the food that gets wasted is expensive, that the amount of food you waste would feed 50,000 people in Darfur," Verner said. "It's the old guilt trip."

Most local universities currently divert food waste, but they can do more. Food - edible and inedible - deserves a better destiny than the landfill. For environmental, economic and social reasons, colleges should strive to reduce waste and pursue on-site composting or, better yet, anaerobic digestion. By so doing, universities can become a model of food diversion while teaching their students a valuable lesson: "the old college try."

Jonathan Bloom, a journalist in Chapel Hill, N.C., is writing a book on wasted food in America. He is a member of the North Carolina Food Diversion Task Force, and he also maintains the blog <http://www.wastedfood.com/>.



The Inquirer | Daily News | Sports | Entertainment | Shop Local | Classifieds
About Philly.com | About the Real Cities Network | Terms of Use & Privacy Statement |