A Story of Change

From Landfill to Soil: Transforming Organics Waste Management in Northwest Michigan

"We can't achieve our state goal of 30% recycling by 2029 if we don't address organic waste."

— Matt Flechter, Recycling Market Development Specialist, Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy

"Our Initiative's collective goal may be reducing waste by a third, but our vision is regenerating Michigan soils by diverting organics out of landfills."

— Sarna Salzman, Executive Director, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

Jessica Conrad with ROTARY CHARITIES
Resources for change.

This case study builds on the series *Stories of Change: How a Systems Change Approach is Transforming a Region* by Jessica Conrad with Rotary Charities of Traverse City. The original *Stories of Change* publication includes four case studies. Three feature the evolution of multi-partner systems change initiatives in Northwest Lower Michigan working to address youth/young adult homelessness, food insecurity, and barriers to health and health equity. The fourth shares the story of how Rotary Charities, a place-based funder, came to support systems change work. This fifth addition spotlights work to transform organic waste management.

Stories of Change offers a unique look at what's possible when many individuals, organizations, and initiatives adopt a shared approach to affecting positive change and align their efforts to address the upstream sources of our toughest community challenges. Full of actionable insights, the case studies are an informative example of purpose-driven collaboration and a source of hope in an unpredictable, fast changing world.

Acknowledgements

Stories of Change would not have been possible without the contributions of so many who are deeply committed to creating communities where all can thrive, including our storyteller and the dozens of changemakers and Rotary Charities' board and staff members interviewed for the series.

Place-based systems change involves many people working across sectors and fields. The stories told here are collective stories of and for the communities from which they have come, and great care has been taken to tell the truest stories possible. Yet with collective stories, there is not one truth, but many. We acknowledge that the stories included here may not represent the whole truth for all involved.

We are deeply grateful for those who have contributed their memories and perspectives to support us in documenting this transformative work and for the skillful storyteller who has woven these threads together to create this narrative tapestry.

About the author

We want to thank storyteller Jessica Conrad for expertly leading this project. Jessica handles each story with care and dedication—careful with its complexity, shared language, and multiple perspectives. Her process embodies values like patience, relationship building and trust, clear communication and roles, and inclusivity, reflecting a deep grounding in systems practice.

Jessica Conrad is a narrative strategist, qualitative researcher, and facilitator who helps purpose-driven people and groups find the story line within complex change. At once complexity-conscious and deeply relational, her practice surfaces and weaves diverse (even conflicting) perspectives to reveal the pattern shifts driving enduring social change. You can reach Jessica at hello@jessicaconrad.com

About Rotary Charities of Traverse City

Rotary Charities of Traverse City is a 501c3 grantmaking public charity. It was founded in 1976 after oil was discovered on property owned by the Traverse City Rotary Club. The organization provides grants, impact investments, and opportunities for connection and learning across a five-county area in Northwest Lower Michigan to contribute to an adaptive and thriving region for everyone.

Learn more about Rotary Charities at:

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Introduction

Since 2018, the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD) has been working to transform how 10 counties in Northwest Michigan manage organic material—food scraps, yard waste, and wood. Today, a growing network of community members, entrepreneurs, nonprofits, municipalities, and state agencies is collaborating to divert organic waste from landfills and channel it back into the local economy, working toward a shared vision of regenerating Michigan soils and creating thriving green collar economies across the region.

Together, participants draw on systems change approaches to create shared understanding of the organic waste management system and to identify actions with the greatest potential for leverage. They also work to align their strategies to shift the conditions that have long kept organic material out of the soil and in the landfill, where it becomes a climate and a public health problem. Thanks to their collaborative efforts, communities across Northwest Michigan are benefitting from new composting infrastructure, enabling policy, and a growing culture of awareness about the value of organic waste—early signals that suggest the system is beginning to shift.

What follows is the story of how OWD partners are transforming the system of organic waste management in Northwest Michigan and in doing so, creating a model for communities across Michigan and beyond. A story of systems change, it is organized around four interconnected strategies and practices that support multi-partner initiatives in advancing transformational change:

Strategies and Practices of Systems Change

Weave diverse stakeholders into the work, build trust, and commit to a common purpose.

Examine the upstream causes that shape a complex problem to build shared understanding and identify the shifts with the greatest potential to influence the system.

Embed ongoing reflection, data gathering, and shared learning into the work so strategies can evolve in response to emerging opportunities and shifting system conditions.

Coordinate and sequence mutually reinforcing actions across multiple levels of the system so that policy, relationships, infrastructure, and culture shift together toward a shared vision. evolve in response to emerging opportunities and shifting system conditions.

About the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative

The Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD) seeks to reduce the amount of organic material sent to landfills by 33% across its 10-county service area. For Initiative participants, this ambitious 2030 goal is the means to a larger end of channeling investment into local green collar economies, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing water quality, and regenerating soils. Since 2018, a multisector partnership with individuals representing the breadth of the organic waste management system—from community composters to state agencies—have been collaborating to make that vision a reality.

The Organics Waste Diversion Initiative serves Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, and Wexford Counties in Northwest Michigan.

Organic material is any material that will break down into soil when composted, including yard waste, woody material, food scraps, manures, and some paper.

The challenge of organic waste

While throwing away organic material like uneaten food or grass clippings may seem trivial compared to other complex challenges, the reality is that it's a harmful public health issue. Organic waste in landfills drives greenhouse gas emissions, contaminates water, and represents billions in lost economic value.

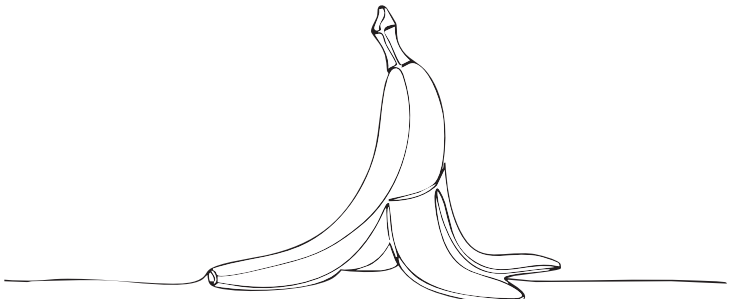
"Organic material simply doesn't belong in the landfill," asserts Kerrin O'Brien, executive director of the Michigan Recycling Coalition, who describes the release of enormous amounts of methane gas as a devastating consequence of landfilling organic material. Methane is a major contributor to climate change and a significant problem in Michigan, whose landfills emit more methane per capita than any other state.[1] Sending organics to landfills also often represents significant lost economic value and wasted food, while families across the region struggle with food and economic insecurity. In fact, U.S. households lose an average of over $2,000 per year due to wasted food.[2] "There's no way that food should be going to landfill when we have food insecurity," emphasizes Lindsey Walker, who serves on Emmet County Recycling's staff. "People should not be going hungry."

Yet Michiganders still throw a significant amount of organic material away. As of 2021, six counties in the Grand Traverse region were landfilling roughly 30,000 tons of organics per year—the single largest component of municipal solid waste. Today, 38% of the waste sent to landfills across the state is made up of organic material,[3] and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) estimates the state's rate of organics diversion at a meager 6%, meaning only a small amount of organic waste is redirected from landfills for reuse through composting or other methods.

Several factors contribute to Michigan's low diversion rate, including a cultural assumption that tossing organic waste in the garbage isn't a problem. "People don't usually think about doing anything other than tossing food scraps," says Sarna Salzman, executive director of SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers (SEEDS). "With most of our trash hauled away, it's easy to forget about it." Sending waste to landfills is inexpensive in Michigan, and the ease with which people toss their organics may also reflect a lack of awareness about the environmental harm of sending organic waste to landfill or the value it can bring when converted into nutrient-rich soil amendments like compost.

[1] Available from: https://www.metrotimes.com/news/michigan-leads-nation-in-toxic-methane-emissions-from-landfills-36940392/
[2] Available from: https://www.biocycle.net/epa-updates-data-on-cost-of-household-food-waste
[3] Available from: https://ecoseeds.org/ecostrategies/compost

Beyond cultural assumptions, policy has also influenced diversion rates. The state has historically invested in landfills, and by the 1980s, advocates were growing concerned: "We really started to worry about the methane generated from landfills. That shifted organic waste from an afterthought to an imperative," recalls O'Brien.



Interconnected challenges and opportunities of organic waste

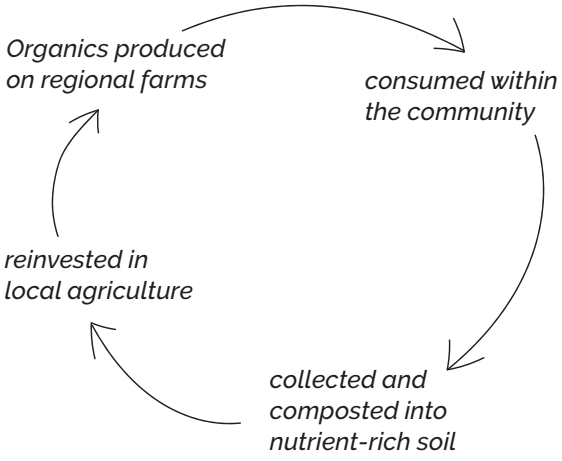
The impact of organic waste ripples across environmental, economic, and social systems, creating interconnected climate and public health challenges when sent to landfills and opportunities when diverted and transformed into valuable resources.

Environmental – When organic waste decomposes anaerobically in landfills, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide, and leachate, a toxic liquid that contaminates groundwater. Composting avoids these environmental harms while transforming organic material into a nutrient-rich soil amendment.

Economic – Contamination from organic waste reduces the value and marketability of other recyclables, burdening municipalities and recycling facilities with the cost of sorting and processing. Diverting organics, on the other hand, creates real economic value. Compost and soil amendments can be sold, and cleaner recycling streams generate higher revenues.

Social – When organic waste ends up in landfills, communities miss out on local economic development across the entire value chain, from collection to processing to distribution. This opportunity is particularly significant because organics are heavy, spoil quickly, and are expensive to transport long distances, making them ideal for local management. Even small- and medium-scale operations can capitalize on these advantages, creating meaningful employment while serving their communities efficiently—and the numbers bear this out at scale with zero waste strategies creating 200 times more jobs than landfilling or incineration.[4]

The OWD imagines a circular economic model for organics:



Early progress and persistent gaps

A statewide yard waste ban passed in the early 1990s thanks in large part to advocacy efforts promoting composting for soil health and waste reduction. "It was the first policy in Michigan to incentivize organics diversion," describes O'Brien, and it prompted an effort among public and private actors to develop infrastructure for yard waste collection, processing, and compost distribution. Several municipalities and counties, including the City of Traverse City and Emmet County, began collecting and processing yard waste themselves. The Michigan Recycling Coalition formed the Michigan Composting Council, a membership group for the then-nascent composting industry, which quickly garnered a following. By the early 2010s,

[4] Available from: https://ilsr.org/articles/new-report-from-global-anti-incineration-alliance-zero-waste-creates-200-times-more-jobs-than-landfills-and-incinerators/

momentum was building across the full waste hierarchy: Goodwill Northern Michigan's Food Rescue program was rescuing and redistributing tens of thousands of pounds of still-usable food annually, while Bay Area Recycling for Community (BARC) was offering multi-jurisdiction organics hauling to residents and local businesses, and several smaller-scale processors across the region were focusing on food scraps. All of these activities signaled the community's growing interest in keeping organic material out of the landfill.

Despite this progress on organic waste diversion and growing public interest in soil health and preventing methane emissions, the state's focus remained on landfilling. Advocates saw a pressing need for more productive use of organic materials and for collaboration across groups and sectors toward that end. The reality on the ground made this need abundantly clear, as many of the actors within the organic waste management system were working in silos. To transform the system, advocates recognized the need to "tend the soil," or to create the conditions not just for different policies and practices but also for different kinds of relationships that would make the transformation possible.

"The responsibility lies with all of us to try to do something better with our discarded materials. Everyone makes waste, therefore everyone can be part of the solution."

— Katelyn Kikstra, EcoStrategies Program Manager, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

Cultivate a Shared Purpose Across the System

A new opportunity to begin tending that soil arrived in 2018 when Rotary Charities of Traverse City offered to support groups participating in Acumen Academy's free Systems Practice course.[5] "Our group came together organically," recalls Salzman, noting representation from BARC, EGLE, Grand Traverse County Resource Recovery, and her own organization, SEEDS. "We decided to talk about trash, and the question quickly became, how can we transform a material we literally pay to have hauled away into a valuable commodity that will enrich our community's quality of life?" Salzman was motivated to participate after noticing a vulnerability in the waste management system: "I had concerns that BARC was the only specialized food scrap hauler larger than a neighborhood youth on a bike in the area. That seemed far too fragile."

The group set out to map the factors enhancing or inhibiting value creation in the region's waste management system, a process that helped the group develop a shared understanding of the system's vast size and complexity. "We ultimately chose to look only at the organic waste stream because it's the largest component of current waste streams," shares Salzman. "We also had a shot at addressing it locally—literally in our own backyards." Unlike other recyclables that need to be sorted and shipped off to specialized processors, food scraps can be successfully recycled in one's own backyard.

Coalescing around organic waste positioned the group to apply for a Seed Grant[6] from Rotary Charities in early 2020 that would support continued relationship building and sensemaking. The group soon expanded to include a nonprofit waste hauler, county representatives, and staff from organizations with both regional and statewide influence. A collaborative discovery process unfolded through a series of meetings with the purpose of understanding each person's current work and challenges in different areas of the system. "These people were doing the work already. Together we zoomed out so everyone could see their jobs in context and where they intersected," recalls Salzman. Over time, relationships among local, regional, and state actors deepened as they uncovered connection points and developed greater awareness of their individual and collective capacities.

Through continued mapping and systems analyses, the group identified the micro and macro patterns holding the current system of organic waste management in place, including their own role

[5] Available from: https://acumenacademy.org/course/systems-practice
[6] Available from: https://www.rotarycharities.org/funding/our-grants/seed-grants.html

in perpetuating patterns that weren't adding up to value creation. Prior efforts to involve critical stakeholders, for example, had focused on "getting people onboard" by explaining the virtues of organics diversion, rather than working closely with those individuals to understand their priorities and see how organics diversion might meet their needs. While well-intentioned, this approach had limited their ability to create the conditions for lasting change. Uncovering how they themselves were part of the system created mutual accountability and deepened their connection to their shared purpose: they weren't just working to change the system, they were part of what needed to change.

Committing to a shared purpose

From months of relationship building and learning emerged a cohered initiative resolved to transform how the region treats organic waste. Calling themselves the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD), participants formalized their commitment and role as a governing body through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) built on shared values of transparent information sharing, collaboration, and collective learning. The MOU marked a turning point, transforming a group of advocates with a shared interest into an initiative with shared accountability for creating enduring change.

The groups originally involved in the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative include Bay Area Recycling for Community, Good Impacts, Grand Traverse County Resource Recovery, Iris Waste Diversion Specialists, Networks Northwest, SEEDS, The Michigan Organics Council, and The Michigan Recycling Coalition, among other individuals from social, public, and private organizations.

"In the beginning, the OWD's governing body was deliberate in only inviting people in who had a high degree of alignment with the Initiative's values and goals. We want the movement to be easy and fun to join, and we are focused on creating opportunities for collaboration. We know we're not hearing from everyone in the system like landfill operators—we don't have any in the room. But as our network gains strength and builds alignment, we can choose to step into more contentious coalition-building conversations, like pushing for increasing state tipping fees or extended producer responsibility policies."

— Sarna Salzman, Executive Director, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

Explore the Problem and Surface Opportunities for Leverage

With their shared purpose formalized, OWD participants turned their attention to gathering baseline data to understand the flow of organics across the 10-county region. The questions became: What would it take to transform organic waste management? Where were the biggest opportunities for change?

With their sights set on producing a market assessment, and SEEDS providing backbone support, the OWD applied for and received a Systems Change Accelerator[7] grant from Rotary Charities in November 2020 that positioned the Initiative to secure matching funding from the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE). "We were grateful that Rotary's early support allowed us to leverage other complementary funding streams," says Salzman, alluding to the synergy between the two grants. While Rotary Charities would fund the relational work of the Initiative, like convenings and other collaborative activities that furthered relationship building, sensemaking, and deepening alignment among participants, EGLE would invest in the market assessment itself.

A 10-county market assessment establishes a baseline

In 2021, Resource Recycling Systems was commissioned to produce the comprehensive assessment of organic material flows on a county-by-county basis, revealing where and how much

[7] Available from: https://www.rotarycharities.org/funding/our-grants/systems-change-accelerator.html

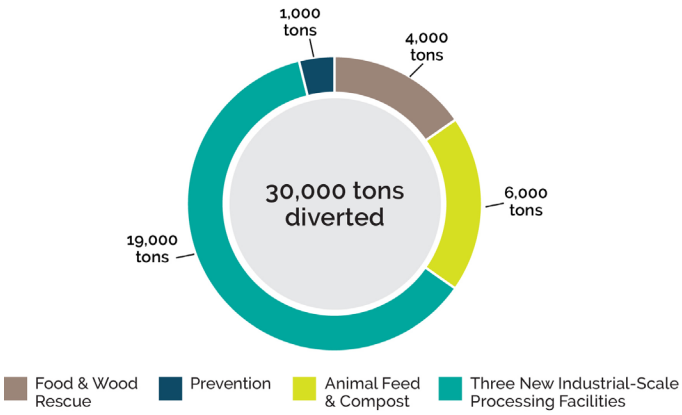
was being generated, wasted, and landfilled across the region, and identifying regionally specific strategies to strengthen prevention, rescue, and composting operations. OWD participants themselves completed a key part of the evaluation, interviewing over 200 local entities involved in organic waste management, including food rescue organizations, haulers, processors, and end users. The result was a comprehensive benchmark of the current system and, equally important, new relationships with more people who would become essential partners in transforming it.

The benchmark revealed both challenge and opportunity for the OWD's work. As of 2021, the region was generating approximately 75,000 tons of organic waste annually, yet only about 10% was being diverted from landfills. Through coordinated prevention, rescue, and recycling efforts, the assessment showed feasible pathways to increase diversion to 35%, capturing an additional 26,000 tons per year that were currently being wasted and exceeding Michigan's recycling targets.

The assessment also pointed to significant regional strengths that the OWD was poised to leverage, including a foundation of strong relationships within the Initiative, early adopters demonstrating what's possible across the value chain, public and private bright spots, rapidly growing cultural awareness about food waste, and diverse motivations—from climate action to soil health to public health to local economic development—converging around organics. What's more, the region has the potential to control the entire value chain locally, from collection through processing to distribution.

Galvanized by the data and energized by their collective assets, OWD participants crafted and committed to ambitious targets that could transform Northwest Michigan into a model for organic waste management and soil revitalization. By 2030, the OWD aims for the region to divert an additional 30,000 tons of organic material from landfills annually through prevention (1,000 tons), expanded food and wood rescue operations (4,000 tons combined), small- and medium-scale recycling into animal feed and compost (6,000 tons), dozens of new community drop-off sites throughout the region, and the addition of three industrial-scale processing facilities (19,000 tons). Salzman shares that these data-driven targets were identified to amplify work already underway in the community and to align with the state's targets. But diversion numbers told only part of the story. "We are all in for the soil," Salzman asserts. "Our goal is 30,000 ton diversion, but our vision is regenerating Michigan soils."

The OWD's 2030 Organics Waste Diversion Goal



Opportunities for leverage

Identifying targets based on the market assessment was only the first step. To achieve them, OWD participants needed to understand not just what they wanted to accomplish, but where within the broader system targeted interventions could have the greatest leverage. This meant looking beyond the operational tiers of the waste hierarchy—prevention, rescue and recovery, and recycling—to examine the shifts in policy, relationships, and mindsets that would either enable or inhibit their success. Drawing on the OWD's systems analyses, the market assessment data, and participants' practical expertise, the OWD leadership identified a systems-level strategy focused on leverage opportunities at three levels: structural, relational, and transformational.[8]

[8] Kania, John, et al. FSG, 2018, The Water of Systems Change, https://www.fsg.org/resource/water_of_systems_change.

Structural change (policies, practices, and resource flows) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Expanding organic waste collection and processing at multiple scales from backyard composting to community drop-off sites to centralized facilities
- Advancing enabling policy at both the county and state levels to support organics diversion
- Securing diverse, sufficient, and sustained investment capital to support enterprises across the value chain

Relational change (relationships, connections, and power dynamics) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Expanding relationships and connections among value-chain actors
- Building new composting capacity and partnerships
- Connecting with adjacent networks, such as those focused on food rescue and public health

Transformational change (mental models) – Leverage opportunities included:

- Educating communities about food waste prevention and the stacked benefits of organics diversion
- Shifting mindsets from viewing organics as waste to recognizing them as valuable resources
- Making change-making opportunities accessible and empowering people's agency to contribute to the movement, such as through backyard composting

The timing for the systemic approach proved fortuitous, though not by chance. By 2022, advocates—including several OWD participants—had brought an eight-bill package[9] to the Michigan legislature that would mandate counties to update their solid waste plans for the first time in two decades, shifting the focus from landfill management to resource conservation and recycling access. This represented the culmination of persistent advocacy work spanning decades, led by organizations like the Michigan Recycling Coalition. With this policy window opening, the OWD positioned itself to advance structural, relational, and transformational changes in tandem, building the infrastructure, relationships, and data that would enable the region to capitalize on the new policy landscape once it took shape.

[9] Available from: https://legislature.mi.gov/Bills/Bill?ObjectName=2021-HB-4461

Aligned funding amplifies what's possible

Early on in the life of the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD), participants moved into new forms of collaboration and deeper accountability, while simultaneously expanding their shared understanding of the organic waste management system. This was made possible in part by Rotary Charities and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), two funders who chose to work together differently, mirroring the collaborative approach they were supporting.

Sarna Salzman, executive director of SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers (SEEDS), which provides backbone support to the OWD, identified an opportunity to leverage both Rotary Charities and EGLE's strengths through aligned funding and brought the vision before both funders. Rotary Charities could support the "how"—convenings and backbone support for collaborative sensemaking—while EGLE could invest in the "what"—the comprehensive 10-county market assessment of organic material flows.

Matt Flechter, the recycling market development specialist at EGLE, had long dreamed of this kind of partnership. "We're not going to be successful with recycling and composting in Michigan on the backs of state or local governments alone. We have to find partners and other funders," he explains. For Freya Bradford, director of systems change and learning with Rotary Charities, the collaboration offered valuable perspective. "It was helpful to see Matt—both a state funder and an issue expert—at the table with the Initiative. He shared how it fits in with the state government's goals and how it's unique in the sense that the same level of collaboration isn't happening in other areas of the state," she says, nodding at Flechter's unusual position of both funding the work and participating in the OWD's leadership.

Once the funding was in play, Bradford and Flechter worked together to address practical challenges, creating greater ease for SEEDS as a grantee partner. "Our money goes out the door upfront when a group gets a grant," Bradford notes. "The state's grants are reimbursement based, and it can be challenging from a cashflow perspective. We gave SEEDS permission to use our funds for things that would later get reimbursed from the state." This flexible, trust-based approach helped remove barriers that might otherwise have slowed the Initiative's momentum.

In hindsight, both funders see significant opportunities for working in partnerships like this. "Being able to learn from another funder's processes has been important and useful to me," reflects Flechter. Bradford goes on to suggest that Rotary Charities and EGLE are only beginning to touch on what's possible. "There's a lot philanthropy can do to orchestrate funding differently so we're not working in silos," she says. "We need to ask each other as funders about focus areas and risk tolerance and proactively discover where the pieces align."

Advance a Constellation of Aligned Actions

In 2022, the OWD approached Rotary Charities for a continuation of the Systems Change Accelerator funding to act on the leverage opportunities and advance the recommendations of the market assessment, using the 2030 targets as a guide. With new resources secured, participants began the work of translating their ambitious vision into coordinated action.

The planning process, Salzman acknowledges, was messy—and necessarily so. With multiple leverage opportunities spanning prevention, rescue, and recycling across 10 counties, there were many possible paths forward. Thankfully the market assessment proved invaluable once again. "It gave us language and a frame for thinking about what each solution-segment could be responsible for diverting," says Salzman, providing a structure for organizing and prioritizing the work across different parts of the value chain.

To set priorities in the context of their complex challenge, the group adopted backcasting as their planning method. "We worked backwards from 2030 to 2027 and asked ourselves, *'If we reach these 2030 targets, then what needs to be true by 2027?'*" Salzman explains. "Those answers make what we should collectively focus on this year more obvious, and based on that, we set up actions and assign people to activities." This approach helped OWD participants sequence their efforts strategically with a commitment to remaining flexible enough to adapt as they learned what worked in practice.

A constellation of mutually-reinforcing actions

At this stage, OWD leadership had been tending the figurative soil of the Initiative for years—creating an established network of trusting relationships, systems thinking capacity, a shared understanding of the system of organic waste management, and trusting funder partnerships. What follows are just some among many of the actions that grew from these enabling conditions to advance the OWD's systems-level strategy. These actions unfolded at multiple scales: some emerged through local partnerships, while another connected to a larger statewide policy advocacy effort that had been building for decades. While they are presented as discrete examples, they're part of interconnected, reinforcing patterns of activity adding up to durable change across the region.

Public-private partnership: Traverse City's in-vessel composting system

The market assessment revealed that access to composting services for all residents and businesses in and near the City of Traverse City had the potential to reduce food waste in Grand Traverse County by more than 50%—the highest diversion rate across the entire region. The City was well-positioned to act, having offered biannual curbside yard waste pickup and composting for roughly two decades. The question became, could the City expand its current composting operations to accept food scraps—a move that would also bring it closer to its carbon-neutral target? [10]

When Salzman learned about a U.S. Department of Agriculture Composting and Food Waste Reduction grant for local governments,[11] she approached Frank Dituri, the City's director of public services, to gauge interest. Dituri's response was immediate: "Sure! I'm always interested in doing something that trends toward environmental good. Why would we not?" Looking back, Salzman credits the Initiative's early relational work with opening the door to conversations like this one. "After building relationships and seeing where the interconnections were, we could have a generative conversation with the City, for example, and say, '*Hey, we know you don't want to mess with your successful yard waste program. What about an offsite food scrap pilot?*'" she explains. "It became more likely that the response would be, 'I trust you, and that idea sounds pretty cool. Let's try it!'"

As the vision to provide City residents and businesses with easy access to food scrap pickups began to crystallize, both Salzman and Dituri knew the project would be a pilot. "More than anything, we wanted it to help people recognize composting at scale as something the City could do," Dituri reflects. "As soon as we started to let folks know what we were planning, they started coming out of the woodwork, asking, 'How can I get involved?'" The pilot met a long-time desire Dituri seemed to perceive among community members for these services.

In 2024, the City's Department of Public Services secured the two-year grant through the American Rescue Plan Act. With these funds, the City purchased a 20-yard in-vessel composter—the size of a shipping container—to meet the goal of processing 100 tons of food scraps annually. While the City used its own contracted grant writer on the proposal, input from Salzman about program design and budgeting was critical to its success.

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[10] Available from: https://www.traversecitymi.gov/community/sustainability.html

[11] Available from: https://www.usda.gov/farming-and-ranching/agricultural-education-and-outreach/urban-agriculture-and-innovative-production/composting-and-food-waste-reduction-cfwr-cooperative-agreements

But purchasing equipment was only part of the equation. To complete the value-chain, the City also needed to add hauling and processing capacity. When Dituri put out a request for proposals, Megan Alexander, owner of Carter's Compost, responded enthusiastically. "I knew I had the capacity to do more and was really excited to grow my footprint," she recalls. "The in-vessel partnership with the City is invaluable because of what it allows me to do with the community and the capacity it opens up." Along with Carter's Compost, SEEDS came on board to help with outreach campaigns, project implementation and management, and distribution of the final product to end users.

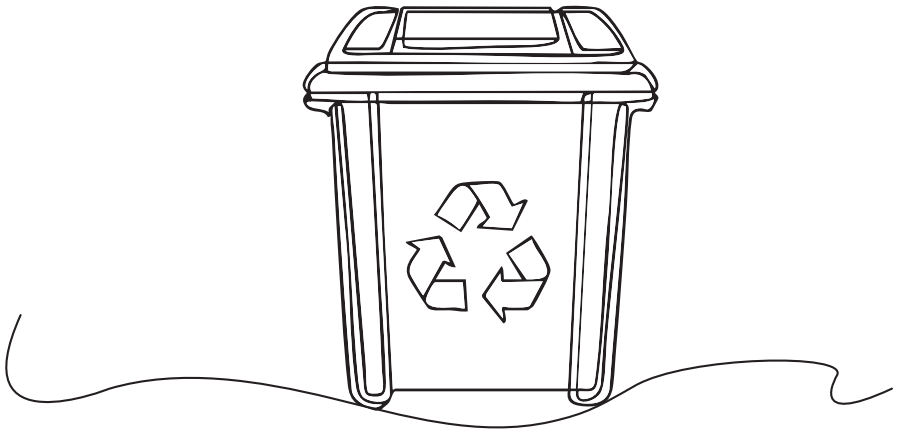
Dituri was intentional with selecting the composter's location. "The idea was to locate the system someplace that it could be seen by the public for education purposes," he says. The system arrived in July 2024, and the pilot gained visibility quickly with awareness-raising events like an annual Pumpkin Smash and the Northern Michigan Compost Crawl. During the inaugural Pumpkin Smash, the community diverted three tons of pumpkins (that's about 400 to 600 pumpkins!), surpassing their goal of diverting just one ton. "The event was absolutely a blast," shares Alexander. "Such a fun way to get people looking at this new service."

The first six months brought challenges, mostly around equipment maintenance. A broken auger chain during winter months meant frozen compost and learning curves for everyone involved. "It's no one's job to be with the in-vessel 24/7," Alexander reflects. "We all play our roles, support one another, and learn together." Alexander and Dituri agree that their constant communication with project partners over email helps them keep information flowing in real-time.

The pilot aligns with the City's Strategic Action Plan,[12] adopted in 2025, which focuses on climate mitigation and adaptation through collaboration. Yet for Dituri, the pilot's success extends well beyond the tonnage numbers. "This is much more of a 'conscious awakening' project than a physical processing project," he asserts. "The goal of the pilot has always been to raise awareness to support what's happening at the regional level." Both Dituri and Salzman agree that the lessons learned from the experience of the pilot will be foundational to expanding composting infrastructure in the City and beyond.

"When you get folks working together who share the same mindset, egos are typically left at the door. That's what we experience working with our partners on the pilot."

— Frank Dituri, Director of Public Services, City of Traverse City



[12] Available from: https://www.traversecitymi.gov/projects/strategic-planning.html

Carter's Compost: growing a hyperlocal value chain

When Megan Alexander purchased Carter's Compost in 2022, she inherited more than a bike-powered bucket hauling business started by an 8-year-old boy in his backyard. She inherited a community ready to embrace composting at scale.

"When I started, I was going to collect scraps, compost, and distribute the compost," shares Alexander. "I was quickly introduced to the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative, and I loved the idea of the bigger picture." That bigger picture helped Alexander see how her small-scale operation fit within a broader transformation of the region's organic waste management system.

Carter's Compost offers food scrap collection and composting services, and its growth in the last three years has been remarkable. Alexander expanded from collecting 6,000 pounds in 2022 to 125,000 pounds in 2025, including collections from restaurants, hotels, and condo associations. "It's been so fun to engage with those people," she shares. "I call them my compost champions."

Yet the work is about more than just diversion numbers for Alexander. "It's not just about the materials we divert but also about the finished product that goes back into community soils, gardens, and plant beds to grow local foods and even local flowers, trees, and grasses," she explains. "It's a hyperlocal value chain that the community is really firmly behind." Finished compost is available to people who subscribe to food scrap pickups, and also for purchase, completing the circle from food scraps back to soil.

"The City has so many champions and so many 'compost curious.' The spark is ignited, and we want that fire to grow."

— Megan Alexander, Owner, Carter's Compost

Public policy: materials management planning

After Michigan's yard waste ban passed in the early 1990s, advocates worked persistently with leadership from the Michigan Recycling Coalition to advance a regulatory landscape more favorable to resource conservation, circular economies, and green jobs. It was through this advocacy that the need for policy changes to improve organic waste management became clear. "As awareness increased and the compost industry grew, we saw an increasing need for oversight and regulation," shares O'Brien.

Along the long arc of change, there were bright spots at both local and state levels. Emmet County, for example, had been on the forefront of organic waste diversion for years as the only public sector composter in Northwest Michigan. The County began operating a dedicated yard waste composting facility in 2005 and started diverting food scraps from landfill in 2015. Walker credits Elisa Seltzer, who led the county's recycling efforts at the time, with understanding that durable change would require both relational and structural shifts. "She came in early, built relationships, and implemented strong policies to incentivize diversion," Walker shares. She goes on to reflect that this legacy now informs her role in the OWD's systems work: "Part of my role as a regional partner is demonstrating what we've done that worked in Emmet County."

At the state level, the Michigan Recycling Coalition worked closely with Governor Snyder throughout the 2010s to pass annual funding for recycling and composting for the first time. Meanwhile, EGLE hosted meetings with roughly 70 different stakeholder groups for more than four years to discuss and adapt the regulatory and funding landscape. "EGLE brought in private sector stakeholders, utilities, and municipalities," shares O'Brien, describing the breadth of participation in discussing what policy changes would support different approaches to managing end-of-life materials. Among the proposed changes was a

funding mandate that passed the legislature in 2018 and set the stage for every county to transform their decades-old Solid Waste Management Plans (SWMPs) into Materials Management Plans (MMPs). Through the updated law, Michigan required organics to be explicitly included in materials planning and also formalized its goal of reducing municipal solid waste by 45%—a target that requires reducing the volume of organics sent to landfills by 30%.[13]

It took until the end of 2022 for the eight-bill package aimed at improving recycling rates to be approved by the House and Senate. "The rulemaking process and stakeholder engagement is what took all that time until December 2022 to actually get the legislative language," reflects Walker. "The funding comes first, then we have to hash out the rules and regulations." In July of 2024, the state finally launched the three-year MMP planning process, which included forming committees that set the table for collaboration across sectors.

For the OWD, this process started precisely when they had the right tools to support it. "The outputs of the market assessment are useful for the county-level policy that the state mandated," Salzman reflects. Today, the comprehensive baseline information on organics flows provide counties with the data they need to inform their planning. "We created one-pagers about organics for every county in our 10-county region," explains Walker. "So as organizations we can go to county planning meetings and say, *'We already have the data on what organics are being diverted in your county. Here's the potential and current gap.'"* The data and its implications have become a critical resource for counties wanting to engage in effective materials management planning that can strengthen and amplify existing initiatives working to boost composting and organics diversion rates.

With these tools in hand and the planning process underway, Walker and O'Brien are hopeful that communities will feel empowered to dream and set bold visions for their futures. "This planning process is really a hope for the future and a way to look—locally and statewide—at all of the options and opportunities available," says Walker. For O'Brien, the MMP process demonstrates how structural policy changes and transformational shifts in how people see and manage organic waste reinforce each other. "The whole MMP process is really about having conversations at different scales to make waste visible," she explains. "My hope is that every single person in this 10-county region thinks about the waste they're generating—and has more opportunities to do something truly productive with previously wasted material."

"This issue affects every single one of us on an individual level. Wherever we go, waste is produced yet our culture is about making it invisible. We put it at the curb and it goes away. Our job has been to make waste visible. To help people understand the implications, good and bad, and then make changes so that the system works better for us all. It takes an incredible amount of time, resilience, money, support on all levels to move that system."

— Kerrin O'Brien, Executive Director, Michigan Recycling Coalition

Education and outreach: compost petting zoo

The market assessment was unambiguous about the need for more education opportunities and lower barriers to entry for backyard-scale composting across the region. "The assessment clearly called for our region to do more general education outreach activities," recalls Salzman, who acknowledges that SEEDS was well positioned to fill at least part of that gap.

The organization already ran a small regenerative farming operation at the City of Traverse City's Historic Barns Park. When EGLE committed additional grant funding in 2022 to support the development of a composting demonstration and training facility at the park, the vision for something both fun and meaningful to the OWD's systems-level education and outreach strategy began to take shape.

[13] Available from: https://www.michigan.gov/egle/-/media/Project/Websites/egle/Documents/Programs/MMD/MMD-Laws/Part-115-Rules.pdf?rev=dad89a7cbc444728944369d1590dec3c

"The thinking was, 'We already compost. We should just scale our existing activities and make them more accessible as a learning experience,'" Salzman recalls. The strategic focus was on attracting residents and inspiring individuals, so keeping the demonstrations "backyard-scale" was important. The question then became about what systems to feature. "Vermiculture is super cool. Then there's this Johnson-Su bioreactor system. We just started spitballing," says Salzman. "There are so many options—we finally decided that we should showcase one of each."

The name Compost Petting Zoo came from Salzman herself. "I didn't think it was going to stick, honestly, but it really has," she laughs. "There's something compelling and invitational about it." The Zoo, a collection of eight different composting systems that visitors can explore and touch, opened the door to education at multiple scales. Signage along the path through the zoo facilitates passive learning for people who walk by, while organized visits from school groups, educators, sustainability clubs, and community organizations create deeper engagement. SEEDS has also connected the zoo to courses offered at the local community college.

Today, the zoo amplifies the conversation about organic waste management while quietly transforming the way people think about it. The Antrim Conservation District and a public farm in Leelanau County have both expressed interest in replicating some of the educational pieces—promising signals that the demonstration effect is already taking hold across the region. For Salzman, that's exactly the point. She sees the zoo as a tangible entry point into the bigger picture of transforming how organics move through the system. Jennifer Flynn, SEEDS' EcoCorps program director who is responsible for daily Zoo operations, finds excitement in nurturing the underlying mindset shift, especially among young people: "What we're handling has typically been considered waste. But it's not waste. It's a valuable resource, and we're transforming it into another valuable resource. Helping young people change their mindsets through the zoo is exciting."

"We want to help people recognize that everyone has the ability to contribute to lasting change. Choosing to act, even imperfectly, is deliberately and intentionally choosing the future we want."

— Katelyn Kikstra, EcoStrategies Program Manager, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

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While any one of these actions on its own might have been absorbed by the existing system of organic waste management without creating lasting change, together they are creating conditions for a new system not just to emerge but to sustain itself. The OWD provides the connective tissue that holds these efforts together across the value chain by surfacing connections that might otherwise go unnoticed, amplifying what's working, and holding space for what's still taking shape.

Shared infrastructure

The Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD) has adopted different forms of shared infrastructure to foster coherence and alignment among participants as it works to advance its shared goals.

Backbone support – SEEDS provides backbone support, convening and stewarding the OWD. This involves supporting and staffing the following operational tasks: serving as a fiduciary and leveraging resources; coordinating collective priorities and strategies into annual action plans and monitoring progress; collecting, synthesizing, and sharing easily digestible information about the system; and connecting new partners and adjacent but related networks for mutual benefit.

Current structure – The OWD's structure has evolved since 2018, adapting as the Initiative's work has expanded and deepened. While the OWD launched as a small group of partners with advisors, it has grown into a multi-layered network that supports different levels of engagement among participants while maintaining strategic coherence.

Organics Waste Diversion Advisory Partnership (OWDAP) – At the heart of the Initiative is the OWDAP, a governance body that provides strategic leadership. The OWDAP is currently made up of ten committed industry representatives. This body sets program strategies, provides leadership on emerging work streams, and supports relationship building across the Initiative. Partners commit to two-year terms and formalize their roles through a memorandum of understanding.

The Alliance – Surrounding the OWDAP is the Alliance, a self-selecting group of individuals and organizations who are engaged in soil-building work. Participants receive updates on the OWD's progress and challenges and inform topics for communities of practice.

Communities of practice (CoPs) – CoPs are peer learning spaces organized around specific topics. CoP members engage in shared learning and share emerging insights back with the Alliance. A Food Scrap Drop-Off CoP formed in 2025 offering mentor guidance, technical assistance, and other forms of empowering support to interested parties. This CoP will continue in 2026, and plans are in the works for a Food Scrap for Animal Feed CoP.

Soil Lovers Unite – Surrounding the Alliance is Soil Lovers Unite, an inclusive space where all community members are welcome. Participants are kept up to date on community happenings like trash trivia, social gatherings, and workshops through a quarterly newsletter and a calendar maintained by SEEDS' staff.

Decision-making – The OWDAP uses a consent-based decision-making model, where decisions are made unless a member offers a valid, reasoned objection. The approach balances speed and inclusion, ensuring that decisions are "good enough for now" and "safe enough to try."

Information sharing – Virtual whiteboards and shared digital folders support transparent and timely information and resource sharing across the Initiative.

This adaptive infrastructure, with its clear roles and multiple entry points, creates the conditions for the OWD to work at multiple scales simultaneously while maintaining the trust and alignment that makes enduring change possible.

"We've been conscientious about consistently checking in from the start with questions like: Is this the way we want to operate? Does this feel right? We've been highly collaborative and have also created a space where people can take ownership of different pieces of the work."

— Sarna Salzman, Executive Director, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

Learn and Adapt as Conditions Change

"There are so many puzzle pieces," reflects Kristin Page, a project manager with SEEDS. "When a new one comes up, sometimes it isn't clear how it's going to connect. But we figure out a place to hold it, and the connection eventually does come up." For the OWD, this capacity to sit with uncertainty while continuing to learn and adapt isn't incidental.

Fostering a culture of learning

Learning has been central to the OWD's development from the very beginning when the original group came together to engage in systems learning through the Acumen Systems Practice course. Over the years, OWD leadership has embraced learning as a strategic practice. Page describes the regular learning cycles that are now built into the rhythm of the Initiative's work: "We're good about leaning into learning cycles as a group. It's something that generates a lot of value. We take time after every action to stop and reflect and ask, *'What did we learn from this? What would you do differently?'*" Salzman adds that emerging insights are then used to inform and adapt the Initiative's two-year plans: "We try to be intentional about capturing feedback in the moment so we can be fluid and intentional about the shifts we're making."

Today, learning opportunities exist at every level of the OWD. Through a space called Soil Lovers Unite and other organized programming, the OWD invites its broadest community of participants to learn together. Participants can also opt in to communities of practice for deeper shared learning around specific topics. Learning also arises more informally, like when people attend the same conferences and bring insights back to the Initiative. Finally, Rotary Charities' Systems Change Community of Practice—a facilitated space where practitioners engage in peer learning around systems-based approaches—provides insights that flow into the Initiative's governance body.

"To ensure we're putting energy toward actions with the greatest leverage, we plan to start using hypotheses and implementing learning questions before events looking ahead."

— Sarna Salzman, Executive Director, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

Ongoing evaluation

The OWD's approach to evaluation operates at multiple levels simultaneously. At the initiative level, the governance body tracks progress in shared virtual spaces including a white board that captures meeting notes and also highlights key targets, upcoming events and milestones, links to action plans and updates, emerging challenges, and early signs of change. This infrastructure keeps the OWD's 2030 targets visible and actionable, while the regular learning cycles built into the Initiative's rhythm—stopping after every action to ask, *'What did we learn and what would we do differently?'*—create ongoing feedback loops that inform adaptation.

At the regional level, the OWD is heavily involved in each county's MMP planning process, openly sharing data and local policy strategy. OWD participants also work individually and collectively to curate and distribute educational materials (like the organics one-pagers) and experiences (like processing facility tours), increasing the quantity and reach of high quality, actionable information across the region. Looking ahead, Salzman is weighing whether to commission a full market reassessment: "In 2026 or 2027, we need to think about whether we want to fundraise for another assessment to determine if the diversion needles have moved across the region."

Signals of change

The most meaningful signal that a system is shifting isn't a single dramatic event. Instead it's the accumulation of shifting patterns that, taken together, suggest something new is taking hold. Across Northwest Michigan, those signals are multiplying within the system of organic waste management. "We highlight signals of change at our meetings," reflects Alexander. "Where that list used to be on the short side, now it's huge. There's so much going on."

The OWD's work is gaining visibility and recognition as a model worth watching beyond the region. EGLE has suggested that Northwest Michigan is "hot and exciting," encouraging the Initiative to press ahead. SEEDS' selection for NextCycle Michigan's 2025 Accelerator Cohort—a statewide program supporting innovative materials management solutions—reflects growing interest in the region's systemic approach from state-level stakeholders. Traverse City's in-vessel composting pilot was also featured as one among fifteen successful public-private partnerships between composters and local governments across the country in a new national publication from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance.[14]

At the level of structural change, there's been active dialogue between Grand Traverse County and City staff exploring ways to scale food scrap collection and composting to the 10,000 tons of organics annually called for in the market assessment. As counties across the region begin updating their MMPs, the OWD anticipates that the policy language itself will reflect a new orientation toward organics. "We should see new language in the MMPs and aligned ordinances and incentives over the next couple of years," Salzman observes.

At the relational level, engagement in the Initiative is expanding at every scale, from the backyard composter to the industrial processor. "People want in and always ask how they can help," shares Page, who credits Soil Lovers Unite for offering an accessible entry point into the work. OWD leadership is also finding greater success at matching new participants to meaningful roles within the Initiative's non-linear work. "We're learning and getting better at inviting others to join a non-linear process. To describe what we're doing in a relatable way and plug them in appropriately without them needing to understand it all," shares Salzman.

At the transformational level, cultural signals are emerging too. Municipalities across the region are increasingly encouraging residents to "leave the leaves," allowing yard waste to decompose naturally rather than bag it for disposal—a small but meaningful shift in how communities think about organic material. The adjacent Food Rescue network has focused on ensuring access to effective food scrap management (hauling and processing) as an added benefit. Perhaps most tellingly, a recent composter operator training was highly attended by EGLE regulators, signaling growing alignment between the regulatory environment and the Initiative's goals.

The most tangible signals are related to known increases in access to hauling services and increased processing capacity. Community food scrap drop-off and processing sites have increased by at least four in the last year, thanks to the OWD's Food Scrap Drop-Off Community of Practice. Carter's hauling services and capacities alone have doubled year-over-year for the last three years, thanks in part to Traverse City's in-vessel composter which diverted 58,000 pounds of food scraps in its first year of operation.

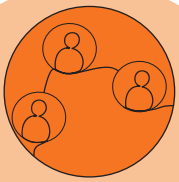
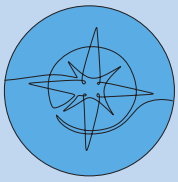
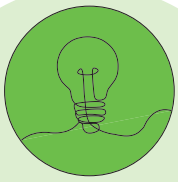
Of course progress doesn't come without challenges. The most persistent one being the inertia of the existing system driven by large waste hauling companies and landfill owners whose business models depend on high disposal volumes. Then there's still the simple convenience of throwing things "away." "Mostly we all know what needs to happen," Salzman reflects. "It's not rocket science, and we don't have to invent something new. We just need to reorient the process and direction that things are being hauled." What makes that reorientation difficult is the scale of change required and the strength of business-as-usual power dynamics. "We're looking at how we can change the system and change perspectives in order to achieve a long-term goal," Alexander acknowledges. "Change is really hard—and we're talking about it at a huge scale."

"We're always putting our ears to the ground listening for emerging bright spots across the system."

— Sarna Salzman, Executive Director, SEEDS Ecology & Education Centers

[14] Available from: https://ilsr.org/article/composting-for-community/keep-compost-local-report

Systems Change in Action: Strategies and Emerging Signals

	Strategies and practices	Signals of change
 **Cultivate a shared purpose across the system**	• Partners participated in Acumen's Systems Practice course • Mapped the regional organics system and identified shared patterns • Formalized commitment through a memorandum of understanding and consent-based governance • Built a values-aligned core group while creating accessible entry points for broader participation	• Strong cross-sector trust and alignment • Clear 2030 diversion goal anchored in a larger vision of regenerating Michigan soils • Growing engagement through the Organics Waste Diversion Advisory Partnership, the Alliance, Communities of Practice, and Soil Lovers Unite
 **Explore the problem and surface opportunities for leverage**	• Commissioned a 10-county market assessment • Conducted 200+ interviews across the organic waste management system • Identified structural, relational, and transformational leverage points • Developed audience-specific informational content to recruit and strengthen allies	• Credible regional baseline data • Clear, data-informed 2030 diversion targets • Readiness to engage effectively in state-mandated materials management planning • Stronger relationships with actors across prevention, rescue, hauling, processing, and end markets
 **Advance a constellation of aligned actions**	• Expanded system capacity through partnership such as with City of Traverse City and Carter's Compost • Aligned with existing adjacent networks such as food rescue and animal feed pathways • Launched the Compost Petting Zoo as a hands-on education hub • Engaged in statewide policy advocacy to advance the eight-bill package aimed at improving recycling rates	• Increased access to food scrap drop-off and hauling services • The City's in-vessel composter diverting 58,000 pounds of food scraps in its first year • Carter's Compost doubling hauling capacity year-over-year for three years • Expanded processing capacity across scales • Policy language beginning to reflect a new orientation toward organics • Visible public enthusiasm through events like the Pumpkin Smash
 **Learn and adapt as conditions change**	• Built regular reflection cycles into meetings and work plans • Used hypotheses and after-action reviews to guide experimentation • Shared learning through communities of practice and peer exchanges • Highlighted signals of change at governance meetings	• Adjusted strategies based on pilot learnings and market realities • Improved coordination across counties and partners • Increasing ability to invite new participants into a complex, non-linear process • Growing confidence that diversion needles are beginning to move

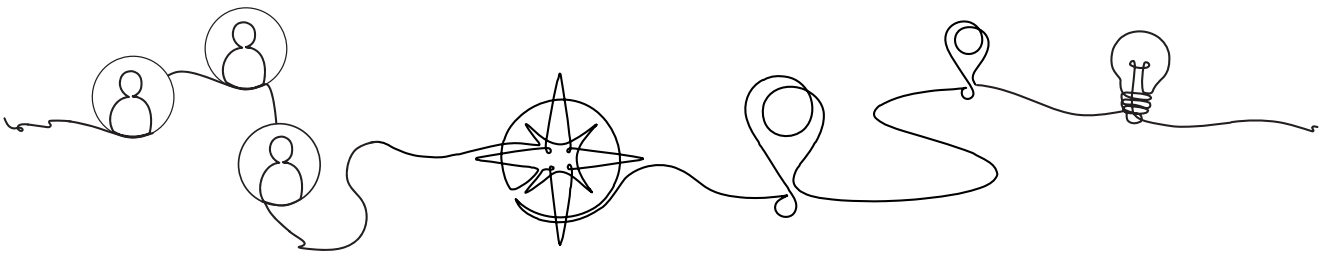
Looking Ahead

At the heart of the OWD's vision is a fundamental truth about how natural systems work: in nature, waste equals food. The waste from one process becomes nutrients for another in a circular system. The organic waste management system that the OWD is working to create reflects this principle, with organic materials produced on the region's abundant farms, consumed in its restaurants, stores, and homes, collected and composted into nutrient-rich soil, and reinvested in the local agriculture that sustains its communities. Pursuing this vision requires creating the conditions for thriving value chains at multiple scales, expanded access to hauling, processing, and distribution across all 10 counties, innovative financing solutions, and consistent demand for organic waste transformed into animal feed or soil amendments. "Our strategies invest in the regeneration of Michigan soils and carbon drawdown," Salzman says simply. The pathway to realizing this vision becomes clearer every day.

What makes this work both actionable and hopeful is that anyone can participate in it. "Food waste prevention and reduction are absolutely every household and municipality's lowest hanging fruit," Walker observes. "Composting is a direct way for people to do something about climate change, about hunger, and about soil building." Anyone can choose to reduce waste more intentionally, divert what remains, and join a growing community of people who understand what's at stake. "We say soil health is human health," Alexander adds. The OWD's growing network of community members, advocates, entrepreneurs, municipalities, and policymakers has aligned to bring this vision to Northwest Michigan—and is doing the hard, patient, joyful work of making its benefits accessible to all.

"We're at the bottom of a bell curve, and I feel like the sky's the limit."

— Megan Alexander, Owner, Carter's Compost



Insights From Systems Change in Action

Six key insights have emerged from this case study that point to practices that the Organics Waste Diversion Initiative (OWD) uses to accelerate enduring change. These insights are for anyone—regardless of organizational context or stage in changemaking—working to change the odds in favor of communities where everyone can thrive.

1 Systems change when we start with alignment

Prioritizing alignment among people engaged in collective systems change work can create a stronger foundation for early collaboration than trying to bring everyone to the table at once. From a foundation of shared purpose and trust, changemakers can then gradually step into more contentious spaces, diversifying participation and even engaging resistant actors without sacrificing the coherence at their core. When the OWD formed in 2018, participants chose to invite only those with shared values and purpose. That decision accelerated the group's ability to develop shared understanding and move quickly into collective action. As the OWD's network gains strength, participants are now positioned to take on harder coalition-building conversations, like advocacy for increased state tipping fees or extended producer responsibility policies.

2 Systems change when we tend the soil

Before durable change can take root, the relational and developmental conditions that make it possible deserve deliberate, sustained investment. This means prioritizing trust building, shared learning, and sensemaking before, and alongside, programmatic action. OWD participants dedicated the Initiative's early years to building relationships, developing shared understanding of the organic waste management system, and deepening their collective commitment before taking coordinated action. Funders can play a critical enabling role here by supporting the relational groundwork, as Rotary Charities did throughout the OWD's development. Importantly, tending the soil is a phase that continues and sustains progress over time.

3 Systems change when we make the invisible visible

Unhealthy systems persist, in part, because their consequences are hidden. Organic waste goes to the curb and disappears. The methane it generates, the economic value it wastes, and the soil it could have replenished remain out of sight and out of mind. Making those consequences visible through data, physical demonstration, and narrative shift is one of the most powerful levers available to changemakers taking a systems change approach. The OWD has pursued this strategy at every level of the system. The market assessment surfaced the scale of the problem in data, and the one-pagers put those numbers directly into the hands of county planners. The Compost Petting Zoo makes solutions tangible for community members encountering composting for the first time. Traverse City's in-vessel composter was intentionally sited for public visibility. Together, these efforts are shifting not just awareness but also the conditions that have long kept the challenge of organic waste invisible.

4 Systems change when data becomes a relationship-building tool

The process of gathering data about a system can be a systems change strategy in its own right. When designed as a participatory rather than extractive process, research can build relationships, deepen shared understanding, and become an opportunity for mutual learning—all of which help make collective action possible. Rather than outsourcing the market assessment entirely, OWD participants themselves conducted over 200 interviews with entities across the organic waste management system. The data was significant, and so were the relationships formed in gathering it. The assessment continues to serve a

connective function today, giving OWD participants something concrete to bring into county Materials Management Planning meetings and a shared foundation from which to design for change.

5 Systems change when funders align

When funders align their strengths and resources around a shared vision, they amplify systems change work. This requires funders to look beyond their own portfolios and ask where their resources, risk tolerance, and focus areas intersect with others'. When Salzman identified the opportunity for aligned funding early in the OWD's development, she approached both Rotary Charities and the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) with a clear vision of how their complementary strengths could serve the OWD: Rotary Charities could support the relational work of the Initiative, while EGLE could invest in the market assessment itself. After the funding was in play, the two funders went further, working through practical logistics to ease cashflow challenges for SEEDS as a grantee partner providing backbone support to the OWD. The result was a funding partnership that both resourced the Initiative's work and mirrored its collaborative approach.

6 Systems change when we balance patience and urgency

The work of transforming complex systems unfolds across multiple timescales simultaneously. Changemakers who can hold both the long arc and the immediate opportunities are often the most effective. The policy arc underlying the OWD's work spans decades, from the yard waste ban of the early 1990s to the state materials management package that took until 2022 to pass. In parallel, OWD participants launched composting demonstrations, developed community drop-off sites, partnered with Traverse City on an in-vessel pilot, and supported Carter's Compost in growing collections from 6,000 pounds to 125,000 pounds in three years. Immediate, tangible actions like these build the evidence base, relationships, and public will that long change arcs require.

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