

Rescuing Food with a Purpose

This past March, the City of Edmonton Climate Task Force announced the Climate Action Fund - a significant opportunity providing \$4.25 million for City departments to advance internal climate projects aimed at reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and address environmental stewardship.

One project that caught the attention of the Climate Task Force was a commercial food waste diversion proposal by the City of Edmonton Waste Services branch which received \$116,000 from the Climate Action Fund. The project will support two goals: rescuing as much edible surplus food as possible from non-residential organizations to distribute to Edmontonians experiencing food insecurity; and collecting and composting the remaining inedible food waste to help avoid landfill GHG emissions.

“The development of this project was driven by many factors,” said Alison Abbink, ICI Project Lead and Senior Waste Policy Planner with the City of Edmonton. “The City has been working with the residential sector to improve our diversion of waste from landfills. The next logical step was to build on that and look into how to best support the Industrial, Commercial, and Institutional (ICI) sector to divert their waste. In Edmonton, this amounts to about 770,000 tonnes, 25% of which is food waste alone.



The majority of this waste is sent to landfill, where it generates methane (a GHG) as it decomposes. We also know that one-in-five Edmontonians experience food insecurity and do not have reliable access to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food, despite the fact that 50% of all food produced or imported into Canada each year goes to waste. So this pilot gives the City the opportunity to address food insecurity by rescuing surplus edible food from our participants, while diverting non edible food away from the landfill, which subsequently reduces greenhouse gas emissions and contributes to our corporate climate goals.”

“The City was actively involved in the Edmonton Metropolitan Regional Board's Solid Waste Collaborative, which brings together representatives from all thirteen member municipalities to advance waste management initiatives in the region. Strathcona County conducted their own successful pilot program with the Circular Innovation Council (CIC) in

2024. So we reached out to our contacts at the CIC to begin exploring the possibility of creating a similar pilot here in Edmonton,” Abbink added.

The CIC is a not-for-profit organization that seeks to advance circular economy practices across Canada through partnership, advocacy and policy development, research and pilot projects such as commercial food waste pilots. Circular Economy is a model of production and consumption that involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible. The CIC is partnering with the City of Edmonton, a waste collection company, a food rescue organization and 30 non-residential organic waste generators, including businesses such as schools, hospitals, supermarkets, restaurants and hotels during this pilot. By leveraging external partners, the project is able to extend its budget to achieve more than the City could on its own.

The environmental benefits of the project mean that diverting organic material away from landfills has the potential to significantly reduce community GHG emissions. During the year this pilot project will run, Waste Services estimates nearly 2,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) from landfills and transportation will be avoided, and over 300 tonnes of organic waste will be turned into 150 tonnes of rich compost. Additionally, the pilot hopes to see 30,000 meals created from rescued food and provided to equity-deserving groups seeking access to nutritious, fresh and culturally appropriate food. Over the long term, the City is working on a four-year roadmap in the Industrial, Commercial and Institutional (ICI) sector focused on applying a zero-waste framework to food and organic waste practices in Edmonton that could lead to these numbers increasing dramatically.

“We are currently in the process of establishing a four-year roadmap to better manage non-residential waste in Edmonton, and are scheduled to present this roadmap to Council in Q2 of 2026. Through a comprehensive literature review and jurisdictional scan of North American municipalities, we've learned that those who have achieved success in diverting ICI waste have done so through a complementary suite of tools, including education & outreach, financial support, and regulations like a source separation bylaw. The pilot is the perfect opportunity to test out all of these policy tools because it offers subsidized waste collection and free boots-on-the-ground support, giving participants the opportunity to explore organic waste source separation in a low-barrier and low-stakes environment. We hope that the pilot program will provide us with robust and granular data to bring to Council to support the wide range of policy tools we are exploring,” added Abbink.