



Division of Environmental and Financial Assistance

# Zero Waste Special Event Planning Guide



*A Guide to Reducing Waste at  
Meetings, Conferences and Events*

*“Whether you plan to divert a portion of waste generated from the landfill or put on a 100 percent zero waste event, the planning process starts with a robust recycling, compost and waste reduction strategy.” — Director Craig W. Butler*

## Introduction

Ohio EPA’s Division of Environmental and Financial Assistance (DEFA) developed this guide to help Ohio event planners reduce waste through recycling, composting and source minimization. It is a general resource guide that can be applied to a wide variety of small and large events, held at inside or outside venues. Managing the waste stream of a special event presents a unique challenge due to the generation of a large amount of waste materials in a short period of time. In spite of this challenge, any event can set and reach zero waste goals with the correct planning and resources.

## What is zero waste?

The Zero Waste International Alliance defines zero waste as a goal to guide people in changing their lifestyles and practices to emulate sustainable natural cycles, where all discarded materials are designed to become resources for future use. A zero waste event minimizes the amount of waste going to a landfill by diverting materials for re-use, recycling or composting. An event is typically considered to be zero waste if at least 90 percent of the waste generated is diverted.

While a 100 percent landfill diversion rate represents the ultimate goal for zero waste, applying zero waste strategies to event planning can make a difference and lead to significant waste reduction, cost savings and a positive guest experience. Any reduction in landfill generation through composting, recycling or source minimization can add value to the event and host organization.



# Zero Waste Hierarchy

The zero waste hierarchy describes a system of material use that starts with prevention and ends with disposal, the least preferred use of materials.



**Reduce:** Reduce the use of materials at the source when possible

**Reuse:** Reuse materials before looking for disposal options

**Recycle:** Recycle materials into new products

**Compost:** Compost organic waste into nutrient-rich product

**Landfill:** Landfill materials as a last resort

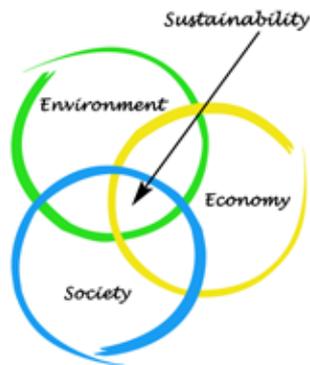
## Why host a zero waste event?

Hosting a zero waste event has several economic, environmental and social benefits that should be considered.

### Economic

Incorporating recycling and composting services at an event may reduce waste disposal costs, depending on the cost of these services in comparison to traditional garbage services. In addition, because zero waste events promote reduction of material use at the source, this results in less material needing

to be serviced and lower payments to the waste hauler. There is also an indirect economic benefit on the local economy, as the recycling industry adds an estimated 68 jobs for every 10,000 tons diverted from the landfill per year.



## Environmental

Landfilling recyclable materials ends their lifecycle, as opposed to keeping the materials in the economy in the form of new products. Recycling materials into new products saves on raw materials and energy in comparison to using virgin materials. In addition, sending organic materials (food scraps, yard waste) to a landfill takes up space that could be used by non-recyclable materials and generates air pollution in the form of methane gas if not captured and burned for energy recovery. Organic materials are a valuable resource better used to make compost, a nutrient-rich soil additive, or to produce natural gas using an anaerobic digester.

## Social

A zero waste event can create a positive image for the event and organizers by demonstrating a commitment to environmental stewardship. The event also encourages guests to generate less waste while increasing awareness in the community about waste issues and sustainable alternatives.

# How can you host a zero waste event?

## Step 1: Commit to Zero Waste

The first step toward zero waste is committing to reducing waste generated at the event. While the logistics of zero waste events can be challenging, the right dedication and planning can yield significant reductions in material sent to the landfill.

### Define Event Goals

Defining landfill diversion goals will communicate to staff, vendors and guests a commitment to zero waste and guide the waste reduction strategies for the event. It is important to set challenging but practical goals according to the level of time, staff and budget available to allocate toward zero waste efforts.

### Zero Waste Goal Examples:

*"We are striving to make this a zero waste event with the goal of achieving a 90 percent landfill diversion rate."*

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***"Our zero waste event was an opportunity to raise awareness on our campus about the waste we generate and how to deal with it in a more responsible manner."***

**— Jeremy King, Denison University  
Campus Sustainability Coordinator**

*“Our goal is to reduce waste at this event by composting all pre-consumer food waste and diverting all recyclable materials generated during the event.”*

### Plan for Measurement

The ability to measure whether the event reached its zero waste goals is also crucial. This measurement could be a comparison of the number of bags or total pounds diverted to other uses versus sent to the landfill.

### Select the Venue

Share the zero waste goals with potential venues and consider their willingness to work toward achieving these goals. Venues with past experience hosting zero



waste or green events may be a good choice. When talking with a venue, be sure to inquire how waste materials are usually managed and if this process can be modified. The waste collection stations should be selected to ensure they are in convenient locations. Additionally, each waste station should include all disposal options to reduce the mixing of recyclables, compost and trash.

Also consider the transportation options for guest attendees, event speakers, etc. Consider venue locations that have access to public transport, bicycle lanes or are positioned in a walkable area, particularly if the event will include overnight accommodations.

### Develop the Team

Teamwork is essential to reaching your event goals. Ensure that team members are in agreement with, and committed to, achieving the zero waste goals. Identifying a zero waste leader will ensure waste reduction and prevention is considered with every event planning decision. Volunteers are also a very effective way to aid in achieving zero waste goals. Train the volunteers in zero waste principles and utilize their efforts in the following areas:



- Assisting guests in the selection of the appropriate bin for their waste.
- Educating guests about waste reduction and zero waste events.

- Reducing or eliminating contamination in the bins by removing incorrectly placed materials.

Volunteers can be drawn from local service groups, event attendees or organizations related to the event. Estimate the number of volunteers you may need based on the number of waste stations at the venue, length of the event and number of expected attendees.

## Step 2: Plan for the Waste Recovery Options

Understanding the various waste recovery and disposal options available in the area is key to an effective waste reduction strategy and will guide decisions about what materials to prioritize and what materials waste haulers should expect to receive. Implement the following solutions to reduce the volume of waste sent to the landfill.

### Waste Generation Prevention

The most environmentally sound and economical way to reduce landfill waste is waste prevention. Examples include using reusable plates and service ware for food service, water refill stations for re-useable containers and electronic invitations and promotional materials. Requesting that guests bring a reusable water bottle or coffee thermos is an example of waste prevention at the source. Appropriate water refill and coffee fill-up stations provide places for beverage access, and cups can be available upon request for guests who did not bring a reusable container.



### Recycling

Recycling is considered a cornerstone of landfill waste minimization. Recycling converts used materials into new products, thereby saving energy and resources. Providing recycling bins, even if only for plastic beverage bottles and aluminum cans, is an easy way to get started. Most waste haulers are able to provide recycling services in addition to garbage service; however, there may be an added cost to incorporate these services. Haulers may also request that materials such as glass or paper are separated. Materials accepted by recycling processors vary, so work with your hauler to determine which materials can be collected.

## Composting

Composting is a biological process that transforms food waste, yard waste and other organic material into a nutrient-rich soil amendment. Composting can be an important step in achieving landfill diversion goals since a large portion



of the waste (20-50 percent) at events serving food is often food waste. It is important to check with your local solid waste district about the availability of compost processors and haulers in your area and the materials they are able to accept. This information will help guide your decisions regarding preferred materials when working with food vendors and caterers.

### Step 3: Review Food Vendor Material Sourcing

For events where food will be served, early communication with vendors or caterers about the zero waste goals is critical for success. This communication provides an expectation for what materials will be used to serve food at the event. The availability of composting and materials accepted by the compost processor will significantly affect what materials are utilized. For example, request that food vendors only use compostable service ware if your compost processor is able to accept them.

Locally sourced organic food is a more sustainable option and should be considered for a zero waste event. The local definition can be specified by the event planning committee, such as produced within 100 miles of the event location. In addition, a minimum percentage for local sourcing can be set in the food vendor contract. Vendors or event organizers may want to highlight the local foods used in the menu and list what part of the region they are from.



Working with vendors on material selection can be challenging, so be sure you know the material limitations of the compost processor before working with food vendors. Writing preferred or required materials into food vendor contracts is one way to ensure compliance with zero waste goals and chosen material sourcing.

## Vendor/Caterer Serving Items

Serving food using re-useable plates and cutlery is the best environmental option. This option may not always be available due to the high upfront cost, logistics of storing materials and operational difficulty. Paper products without plastic liners are preferable to plastic and Styrofoam products because they can be composted. If composting is available, the table below could be provided to a food vendor to guide their materials usage. If composting service is not available, choosing plastic cutlery made of 100 percent recycled materials is a good option. It is important to note that most recyclers do not accept food-soiled paper products.

Preferred Materials	Un-acceptable Materials (non-recyclable or non-compostable)
Paper Sandwich Wrap	Aluminum Foil or Plastic Wrap
Paper Plates	Plastic Plates or Styrofoam Plates
Paper Bowls	Plastic Plates or Styrofoam Bowls
Compostable Cutlery	Plastic Cutlery
Paper Boxes	Plastic Clamshell Containers
Bulk Dispenser Jars for Condiments	Individual Condiment Packages

## Vendor Education

The more you can educate vendors and caterers about zero waste and the event's goals, the more likely they will take actions toward achieving these goals. Provide vendors a summary of the zero waste plan and event goals along with the economic, environmental and social reasons to strive for zero waste. Identify source materials that align with the plan and review the available material recovery and disposal options. Discuss the opportunities to divert other recyclable materials generated by vendors (boxes, shrink wrap, etc.) and plan for the collection of pre-consumer food scraps generated during food preparation. Include a timeline for the selection of food serving materials in the summary plan.



## Step 4: Address Collections and Hauling

Choosing a hauler that understands, and is willing to work toward, the event's zero waste goals is crucial to success. Identifying a point person from the waste hauler to provide information about material disposal options and offer logistical guidance for waste collection is helpful. The hauler may also provide information about local processing of recyclables and the extent of sorting required.

### Containers

Container placement and design significantly impacts the material accuracy in each container. To encourage the correct disposal of materials:

- Place compost and recycling cans directly to the left of garbage cans to make the choice between landfilling and re-use a simple decision.
- Stage volunteers at the leftmost point of the bins to direct attendees.
- Clearly mark the difference between the recycling, compost and landfill containers, including which materials go in each container.
- Use different colors for each material bin (for example, blue for recycling, black for landfill waste, green for compost).
- Keep signage consistent across the bin types throughout the event.
- Use landfill as the language on the garbage container to communicate to guests the endpoint for the material.

***“One of the biggest challenges we face when hosting a zero waste event is recruiting volunteers to oversee waste stations throughout the event. You can have the best waste station signage in the world, but without dedicated volunteers you’re likely going to deal with contamination in your waste streams.”***

— Kristin Hall, Zero Waste Northeast Ohio

If you are able to find a sufficient number of volunteers, place one person at every waste station to guide guests on what materials go in which bins. Educate volunteers about materials they will see at the event and ensure they understand what materials go into each container and what to do if they have an item they are unsure of.

Prior to the event, identify the person(s) responsible for taking full bags of material away from waste stations and determine where the material will be temporarily stockpiled.

## Food Donations

Donating unserved leftover food from the event can be an option for reducing food waste. Contact community leaders or the Ohio Association of Foodbanks ([ohiofoodbanks.org](http://ohiofoodbanks.org)) for a list of local food banks or shelters that are able to accept donations. Ensure that all food handling practices comply with the requirements of the local health department.

## Step 5: Conduct Communication, Promotion and Guest Education

Highlighting the zero waste goals in communications to guests, vendors, venue operators and the event team is fundamental to a successful zero waste event and encourages ownership for success.

### Invitations and Promotions

To prevent waste generation, instead of paper consider electronic invitations, promotion and communication. Promote the event as zero waste throughout the promotional materials and explain the zero waste goals.

Instead of handout materials or event proceedings, post the documents online or provide a USB drive. A few copies can be made available for those guests unable to access online documents.

### Guest Education

Guests are more likely to change their waste generation and disposal behavior if they are aware of why they are being asked to do so. Provide guests with simple and easy-to-understand information regarding zero waste.

If possible, make an announcement during the event about the zero waste goals and the primary reasons for striving for zero waste. Volunteers who guide guests at the waste stations can encourage guests to partner with the zero waste team to achieve those goals.



Be sure to communicate:

- The meaning of a zero waste event.
- The event's zero waste goals.
- The locations of waste collection stations.

Volunteers who guide guests at the waste stations can also be trained to educate them on the reasons for striving for zero waste.

## Step 6: Measure and Communicate Success



Measuring, reporting and communicating the success of the zero waste event assists in the continuation of future waste reduction efforts. Showcasing the results to guests, vendors and event sponsors strengthens the continued investment of time and resources dedicated to conducting zero waste events.

### Measurement Methodology

Since the main goal of zero waste is landfill diversion, focus the measurement on total quantity of materials recycled, composted and disposed as garbage. To calculate the landfill diversion rate, use the following formula:

$$\text{landfill diversion rate (\%)} = \frac{(\text{lbs of recycling} + \text{lbs of compost})}{(\text{lbs of recycling} + \text{lbs of compost} + \text{lbs of garbage})}$$

This formula can also be applied when using the number of bags of material in place of pounds.

Ensure that the zero waste team understands who is responsible for conducting the measurements and where the measurements will take place.

## Partnership Opportunities

### Local Solid Waste Management Districts

In Ohio, solid waste management districts (SWMDs) are organizations that provide solid waste planning and increase Ohio community, business and industry efforts to reduce and recycle waste. Contact the local SWMD for information about composting processors, haulers, recyclers and other questions concerning solid waste in the area. The SWMD may also have bins or other resources available for zero waste or green events. Find your local SWMD at [recycleohio.gov](http://recycleohio.gov).



## Recycling and Litter Prevention Program

Ohio EPA's Recycling and Litter Prevention (R&LP) program provides financial opportunities to local governments and non-profit organizations to help establish and implement recycling and litter prevention programs. The R&LP program has established a financial partnership with the state Keep Ohio Beautiful organization for distribution of recycling collection materials to event organizers (see Event Grants description below). It is recommended that your first point of contact be the local waste hauler, as they may be more familiar with available resources and disposal options. Additionally, they may have resources available to assist in beginning or expanding recycling efforts at your event or may be willing to partner with the local SWMD to maximize the recycling potential. Find more information about recycling and litter prevention grants at [epa.ohio.gov/ocapp/grants](https://epa.ohio.gov/ocapp/grants) and more information about recycling at [recycleohio.gov](https://recycleohio.gov).

### Keep Ohio Beautiful

Keep Ohio Beautiful (KOB) serves as Ohio's umbrella organization for more than 30 local affiliate organizations. By growing the local affiliate network, KOB provides a strong support system and the opportunity to share best practices and successes. KOB enables volunteers in communities throughout Ohio to improve waste handling practices, litter prevention, recycling, beautification and community greening efforts. Ohio EPA and KOB have a long-standing partnership to help strengthen our communities, protect our land and water and improve our quality of life. Find more information at [keepohiobeautiful.org](https://keepohiobeautiful.org).

### Office of Compliance Assistance and Pollution Prevention

Ohio EPA's Office of Compliance Assistance and Pollution Prevention (OCAPP) is a non-regulatory program that helps small businesses and other Ohio organizations comply with environmental regulations, prevent pollution and jumpstart recycling and litter prevention efforts. OCAPP employees have experience and expertise in the field of materials management and can assist with questions and planning a zero waste event. Contact OCAPP at (800) 329-7518

## Zero Waste Event Partnership Grant

Every year, thousands of tons of recyclable materials are unnecessarily taking up vital space in our local landfills. Special events frequently generate a significant number of empty bottles, cans, and plastic cups that can easily be recycled. By encouraging recycling at statewide special events such as: county fairs, festivals, and marathons, Keep Ohio Beautiful and our local government partners can help extend the life of our landfills and prevent our communities from having to build additional landfills.

Today, there is a growing expectation that recycling bins will be available in public spaces and at special events. Recycling extends the life of our landfills and sends a positive message to Ohio communities that we take an interest in the well-being and cleanliness of our communities and the environment. Clearly marked and conveniently located recycling containers will help divert significant amount of waste from the landfill and may save the community money on garbage disposal costs.

Keep Ohio Beautiful has developed a material distribution program for local government and non-profit agencies to apply for special events recycling & waste reduction supplies. Our goal is to create an efficient distribution system of special event recycling & waste reduction supplies to local government agencies. These special events may include County Fairs, Festivals, and Marathons. Each applicant will complete a registration form and reporting form when ordering their materials and sending in their final recycling collection data. Each community or organization will be able to apply for one grant per year. A minimum of 25 grants (\$1600 maximum worth of materials per applicant including shipping costs) will be awarded until supplies run out. Only government agencies or non-profit organizations can apply. Each applicant can apply for a maximum total of 27 Corrugated Recycling Bins, 9 ClearStream Containers and 4 Boxes of Bin Liners.

For additional information and to apply, please visit Keep Ohio Beautiful at [keepohiobeautiful.org/zero-waste-event-partnership-grant/](http://keepohiobeautiful.org/zero-waste-event-partnership-grant/).

## Appendix 1: Event Checklist

X	Task
	<b>Step 1: Commit to Zero Waste</b>
	Become familiar with zero waste
	Define reasons for hosting a zero waste event
	Define event goals
	Plan for goal measurement
	Select the venue
	Develop the team
	<b>Step 2: Plan for Waste Recovery</b>
	Familiarize yourself with waste recovery options
	Evaluate the waste streams at the event
	Determine the availability of composting services
	Find ways to prevent waste at the source
	Create a waste prevention plan
	<b>Step 3: Review Food Vendor Material Sourcing</b>
	Select food vendors willing to participate in zero waste event
	Communicate zero waste goals to vendors
	Create a preferred material list for food service ware
	Ask vendors to strive for a certain percentage of locally sourced food
	<b>Step 4: Address Collections and Hauling</b>
	Select recycling, compost and waste haulers
	Explore options for leftover food donation
	Determine the number of zero waste stations and associated bins needed for each material
	Identify who is responsible for ensuring proper collection from each station
	Create signage for each material to guide guests
	<b>Step 5: Conduct Communication, Promotion and Guest Education</b>
	Include zero waste goals in event invitations
	Make event documents or proceedings available online
	Provide guests with information about the zero waste event
	<b>Measure and Communicate Success</b>
	Determine the process for measuring the success of the zero waste goals
	Identify who is responsible for conducting and tracking the measurements
	Calculate the diversion rate percentage using the given formula

## **Appendix 2: Top Five Tasks to Reduce Waste at Special Events**

1. Develop a waste reduction plan that includes both public guest areas and back of house food preparation areas.
2. Use digital communications (conference website, RSVP, social media) to reduce paper waste.
3. Select a venue that offers comprehensive recycling and composting services.
4. Work with food vendors to create a preferred service ware material list.
5. Select food vendors that offer the use of washable plates, silverware and linens.

## **Appendix 3: Example Questions for Vendors and Caterers**

1. What items will be served or available for guests (food and/or giveaways depending on the vendor/exhibitor)?
2. For food vendors and/or exhibitors: How are the items packaged?
3. For exhibitors: Do the items contain any percent of post-consumer recycled content?
4. For exhibitors: Are any of the items recyclable?
5. For food vendors: Can you provide reusable service ware? (tablecloths, silverware, glasses, mugs, plates and cloth napkins that can be washed and reused)
6. For food vendors: If not, will you be able to obtain certified compostable service ware for the event?

### **References**

[Zero Waste Event Planning Guide](#) – Seven Generations Ahead

[Zero Waste Event Planning Guide, 2015](#) – Zero Waste Northeast Ohio

[Sustainable Events: Ideas for Incorporating Environmentally Friendly Practices into Meetings and Events](#) – Ohio EPA

[Zero Waste Event Guide – Sustainability](#) – University of Virginia

[Waste Minimisation Guide Events and Venues](#) – Zero Waste SA

[Sustainable Events Guide](#) – UNEP DTIE Sustainable Consumption and Production Branch



P.O. Box 1049  
Columbus, OH 43216-1049  
Phone: (614) 644-2798

***outreach.defa@epa.ohio.gov***

***epa.ohio.gov/defa***

**Compliance Assistance Hotline: (800) 329-7518**

Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.