KEYSTONE environmental solutions

WHITE PAPER 04

Beyond the Landfill: Recycling and Organics Programs That Pay for Themselves

How a well-designed recycling and food waste program lowers total waste spend, and how to avoid the contamination fees that undo the savings.

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Key takeaways

- The savings from recycling mostly come from shrinking trash service: smaller containers, fewer pickups and less landfill tonnage.
- Contamination fees can wipe out those savings. Clear signs, good bin placement and staff training prevent most of them.
- Food waste is heavy and wet. Separating it can sharply reduce tonnage-based disposal costs for restaurants, grocers and cafeterias.
- Measure diversion so you can show results and keep improving.

Where the savings come from

A recycling program rarely saves money because of what the recyclables are worth. It saves money because every cubic yard that goes into a recycling container is a cubic yard that no longer goes into the trash. Once enough volume moves, the trash container can be made smaller or picked up less often, and landfill tonnage drops.

Cardboard is the clearest example. It is bulky, fills trash containers quickly and is widely recyclable. Businesses that generate a lot of it can often reduce trash service substantially by separating it, and high-volume sites may benefit from a baler that compresses cardboard into bales for collection.

The contamination trap

When the wrong material ends up in a recycling container, such as food, plastic film, liquids or general trash, the hauler may charge a contamination fee or treat the whole load as trash. Repeated contamination can make a recycling program cost more than it saves.

- **Use clear signs** with pictures of what goes in and what does not, placed on and above every container.
- **Place bins in pairs.** A recycling bin should always sit next to a trash bin, so people are not tempted to use the nearest one.
- **Train staff** during onboarding and again whenever contamination appears.
- **Spot-check containers** and photograph problems so you can fix the cause.
- **Ask for documentation** of every contamination fee, with a photo and date.

Adding food waste collection

Food waste is heavy and wet, which makes it expensive when disposal is priced by the ton and unpleasant when it sits in a trash container. Restaurants, grocers, cafeterias and food processors can separate it into dedicated containers for composting or other organics processing. A growing number of states and cities now require larger food waste generators to keep organics out of landfills, so a program can also keep a business ahead of regulation.

A successful organics program starts in the kitchen: a small collection bin at each prep station, a clear list of what is accepted, and a collection schedule frequent enough to avoid odors and pests.

An illustrative example

A sample full-service restaurant has one 6-yard trash container picked up six times a week. After separating cardboard and food waste, its service looks like this:

STREAM	BEFORE	AFTER
Trash	6 yd, 6x per week	6 yd, 3x per week
Cardboard	In the trash	8 yd, 1x per week
Food waste	In the trash	Totes, 3x per week

Sample service levels for illustration only. Pricing for recycling and organics varies widely by market.

The trash pickups are cut in half. Whether the new program saves money overall depends on local pricing for cardboard and organics collection, which is why every program should be priced out before it starts.

Measuring the result

The standard measure is the **diversion rate**: the share of total waste kept out of the landfill.

> **Diversion rate = tons recycled and composted ÷ total tons of waste × 100**

Track it monthly by location, along with contamination incidents and total spend, so you can show progress and spot problems early.

How Keystone helps

Keystone starts or expands recycling and food waste programs, prices them against your current trash service so the numbers work before anything changes, and resizes trash service once volume moves. We audit every contamination fee, and we can report your diversion rate and spend by stream for every location.

Get your free savings analysis

Send us your most recent waste invoice for all locations. We will compare your pricing with similar Keystone clients and review our findings with you within 48–72 hours.

Rob Moore, VP of Sales and Consulting · 412-722-8800 · r.moore@KeystoneES.com · www.KeystoneES.com