

Residential Building and Restaurant Find Food Waste Pickup Success

Bay Square Condominium, a 113-unit residential and commercial building at 950 Massachusetts Avenue, joined the City of Cambridge Food Waste Pickup (formerly known as Curbside Composting) in 2023. On a cold Monday night in March, trustees held a lively and well-attended food waste information session in the lobby to kick off the program. Tasty desserts and warm drinks were provided. At the meeting, Deb Albenberg, the City's Food Waste Program Manager, demonstrated how to use the food waste carts (they have rotating locks) and kitchen food scraps bins (lined with compostable bags), and shared how the program supports the City's waste reduction and rodent control goals. Residents asked whether specific items were accepted, and how the program would help reduce trash and keep rodents away from the loading dock, which is shared with the adjoining restaurant. At the end of the meeting, Deb gave residents kitchen bins that had a starter set of compostable liner bags and simple instructions inside. For those who missed the meeting, kitchen bins were distributed at the concierge desk.

Residents immediately began collecting their kitchen waste in their kitchen bins and dropping their tied bags of food scraps into food waste carts in the first floor Recycling Room. Bay Square's superintendent was pleased because now messy, smelly food waste went into rodent-resistant carts that are easy to move to the sidewalk on collection day. Two months into the program, Owners Group organizer Sharon Britton reported to the Cambridge Condominium Alliance, "It has been a big hit!"

Once the residential side of the building was up and running, building staff soon realized that to achieve waste reduction and rat control goals, it would be critical to get the restaurant on board. Because of considerable rodent activity in the loading dock/trash area, the property manager, Nick Bergdoll, worked with the City to get the restaurant downstairs to join Cambridge's Small Business Food Waste Pickup. This enabled them to divert a large amount of food waste from the garbage disposal and dumpsters into commercial-size food waste carts with automatic locks. City workers empty these carts twice per week.

For the first few weeks of restaurant participation, residents made weekly inspections of the restaurant dumpsters early on Monday mornings before trash pickups to make sure the restaurant kept food out of the trash. Early on, residents saw one or two rats every time they inspected. As restaurant staff got better at food waste separation, with the help of laminated signs in Chinese (No food in the trash. Put food waste in the green cart.), the rats began to retreat. Along with some decluttering, the loading dock has become much safer for restaurant and building staff to use and a cleaner, more pleasant place for all.

Now that building occupants were doing the right thing with their food waste, the question was, “How do we help residents continue separating food waste?” Residents and staff agreed that if they could remove the extra step of seeking out and purchasing food waste bags when they run out, it would be easier for residents to continue participating. When the City offered a wall dispenser for food scraps bags, building staff agreed to install it behind the food waste cart in the Recycling Room and purchase large rolls of bags for the dispenser, which cost between \$10 and \$15 per household per year. Now residents can take a new bag on their way back from dumping their food scraps.

Now that systems were in place, the building did the following to maintain participation level:

1. Residents formed a Welcome Committee to meet with new residents soon after they move in, spending time explaining what goes and does not go into trash chutes, food waste, and recycling carts. That has also increased food waste diversion. Sharon Britton writes, “I think people are happy to do it right, but someone has to take the time to tell them.”
2. Residents made and distributed “A Guide to Waste Disposal at Bay Square Condominium” with the sub header “Let’s Get Rid of it Right!”. This brochure helps residents know how to properly get rid of trash, food waste, and recycling for pickup, books to swap, clothing and textiles for donation, and who to contact for more information.
3. Whenever supplies of kitchen bins for new residents ran low, building staff ask the City’s Food Waste Program Manager to deliver more.
4. Building staff monitor, order, and stock the bag dispenser with a big roll of bags. This ensures residents have uninterrupted access to food scraps bags in a convenient location.
5. Signs in the Recycling Room and stickers on carts remind everyone what goes where.

How do we measure success?

- **Increase in food waste diversion**

Sharon writes, “We have managed to get very good compliance among our residents with composting.” For a while residents sent to the curb one partially filled 35-gallon food waste cart per week, but by January 2026 residents regularly fill up three carts per week and requested a fourth cart to allow them to keep one in place when the other three go out to the curb for pickup. Based on the number of occupied units (some

are vacant or only occupied seasonally), we estimate that at least 80% of Bay Square households are now participating in the food waste program.

- **Less mess**

The facilities manager reports noticing a lot less liquid dripping out of the compactor that fills up with bags that come down the trash chute. This indicates a big drop in food in the trash, because food waste leaks.

- **Fewer clogged drains**

Since residents now use their kitchen bins instead of their in-sink garbage disposals, the property manager has noticed at least a 25% reduction in Drain Doctor calls.

- **No more rats in trash dumpsters**

On the google group a resident reported “a direct hit in the ongoing battle against loading dock rats made possible by restaurant and resident food waste pickup. Ritchie Medeiros, the new facilities manager, reports that in the three weeks he has been on the job at Bay Square he has seen only one rat on the loading dock — and that was on the first day he was here. Ritchie is out on the dock in the early morning dark when rats tend to be active.”

Lessons Learned

Bay Square identified and addressed the two biggest hurdles to achieving high levels of participation:

1. Receive kitchen bins and information from neighbors, not just from City notices (Welcome Committee and brochure).
2. Ensure uninterrupted access to food scraps bags in a convenient location (wall dispenser).

Here are more general strategies used by Bay Square that every multifamily building in Cambridge (and beyond) can implement:

1. Provide simple and consistent information to new residents and building staff. This helps all stakeholders understand their role in maximizing food waste diversion.
2. Keep food waste supplies on hand to make it easy for new residents to get started and for everyone to continue keeping food out of the trash.



Providing free kitchen bin liner bags has been key in helping residents build the food waste recycling habit. Bay Square condo owner Carlos Rubiales shows how it's done. **Dump a bag. Take a bag.**