

Middletown's Reusable Takeout Container Pilot



Background & Pilot Setup

The City of Middletown is located just south of Hartford, CT along the Connecticut River. Home to Wesleyan University and CT State Community College Middlesex, Middletown contains a bustling and vibrant downtown area.

With an aim to move away from single-use products and test out reusable takeout containers at its local restaurants, the City of Middletown applied for and received an [EPA Region 1 Healthy Communities Grant](#) to fund the costs of a reusables pilot program. This funding covered expenses such as procuring reusable containers for the duration of the pilot.

The City identified three local restaurants that wanted to participate: (1) [Perk On Main](#), a local staple for breakfast and lunch, (2) [Story and Soil Coffee](#), a specialty neighborhood coffee shop, and (3) [ION Restaurant](#), an award-winning vegan eatery.

The Center for EcoTechnology (CET) partnered with the City of Middletown on the pilot. CET conducted research into reusable takeout container programs, evaluated different container types, and sought input from the participating restaurants. Based on a variety of factors, including the fact that the restaurants were interested in non-plastic containers, the City of Middletown and CET selected a stainless-steel container program with tracking technology and an accompanying app-based inventory management system.



In June 2023, the City of Middletown's Recycling Coordinator, in addition to representatives from the container company and CET, visited the three restaurants to distribute the reusable containers and assist with the initial setup of the project.

How do reusable takeout container programs work?

To reduce waste from single-use items, restaurants can offer reusable takeout containers. Community-wide reusable container programs with multiple participating businesses can amplify the waste reduction impact and enable customers to conveniently return their used containers to any of the participating businesses.

Some communities partner with a third-party container provider to implement a reusables program. Some examples of container providers are [DeliverZero](#), [Muuse](#), [Ozzi](#), [Recirclable](#), [ReUser](#), and [USEFULL](#). In addition to supplying the containers, these companies may also support program logistics and engagement. Some also provide tracking technologies and/or inventory management systems for the containers.

Promotion & Public Engagement

The City of Middletown and the participating restaurants used various strategies to promote the program to the community.

City of Middletown's Efforts

Early June 2023:

When the program launched, the City of Middletown and CET shared [press releases](#).

July 23, 2023:

The City of Middletown set up a promotional table on the street near the restaurants to spread the word about the program.

Early September 2023:

The City funded a \$2 discount promotion for the customer's first order. Two of the three restaurants opted for this promotion.

Mid-September 2023:

The \$2 discount, QR Code, and reusable container program description were advertised in the Wesleyan University newspaper.

Restaurant Launch Tips

The owner and manager of Perk On Main encouraged their staff to download the reusable container rental app to familiarize themselves with it and advocate for customers to use it. Promoting the program to frequent customers also proved advantageous, since they would be inclined to revisit the restaurant within the confines of a fixed rental period.

Perk On Main placed signage throughout the restaurant that provided a step-by-step explanation on downloading and using the app. The restaurant also placed a QR code to download the app in customers' to-go bags.

Pilot Statistics



64 containers were checked out between early July and mid-November 2023.



The average rental time was 2.5 days.

July was the busiest month for reusable container checkouts.

More cups were checked out than bowls.



In early August, the rental period was increased from 3 to 7 days.

Benefits

Each restaurant had the chance to experiment with a reusable takeout container program within its operations without the need to invest in containers or a logistics system of their own. Among these restaurants, sustainability was already a core focus. Perk On Main, for example, had been actively encouraging its staff to use dishes and cups instead of single-use containers during their breaks. The reusable container pilot further solidified and expanded upon this existing initiative.

Throughout the pilot, the container company was a communicative and helpful partner. In August 2023, in response to requests from restaurants and customers, the container company increased the container rental period from three to seven days. This adjustment helped engage more customers.

Challenges

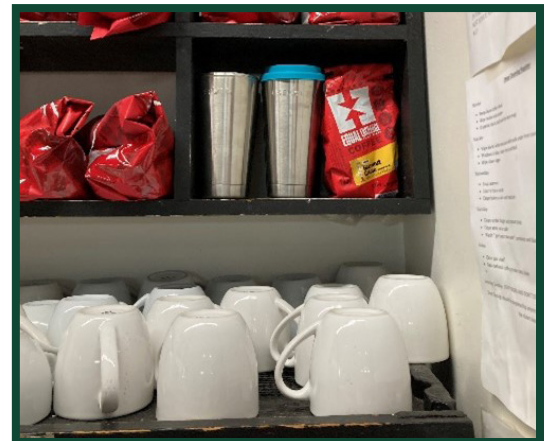
Generally, voluntary programs that require a behavior change or entail a slight inconvenience for customers understandably pose challenges. A program with a fixed rental period can be especially discouraging for individuals who aren't frequent visitors to a specific restaurant or are merely passing through an area. In the case of Middletown's pilot, customer hesitation was alleviated a bit when the rental period was increased from three to seven days.

Reusable takeout container programs that utilize app-based tracking systems can be beneficial from data-tracking and logistics standpoints, but they can also pose challenges. Some customers expressed a hesitancy toward downloading an app to participate. Additionally, since the containers had to be checked out in-person (customers had to scan a container's QR code with their phone to check it out), reusable containers were unable to be utilized in online takeout orders.

The reusable cup size also caused limitations. Perk On Main serves 20-ounce cold drinks, but the cups offered by the container company were only 16 ounces. Due to this size difference, Perk On Main only offered their hot drinks in the reusable to-go cups.

A Peek into Perk on Main's Best Practices

1. Perk On Main (POM) displayed the reusable to-go cups near the ordering line to encourage customers to take part in the program.
2. Based on how POM's space is configured, the staff member at the register is near a cup storage area, and farther from where dishes are stored. For this reason, POM ended up storing a stock of the reusable containers near its register. When customers requested a reusable takeout container, staff could then seamlessly grab a container and hold it up for the customer to scan with their phone. Staff at the register would then write the customer's name on the container with a washable pen.
3. Similarly, POM stored the reusable to-go cups near their coffee cups for easy access.
4. POM ran the reusable containers through the dishwasher, treating them the same way they handle glasses and plates used for dine-in.
5. POM sited its reusable container return area next to the existing compost/recycling/trash station. At the return area, they placed signage containing the designated return QR code for the containers. The return spot was composed of a rack with bins to store the used containers.



Lessons Learned & Keys to Success

Over the course of this program, the restaurants gained a better idea of the material type, container size, and rental period they would implement in the future if they were to permanently adopt a similar program. While POM and its customers liked the reusable takeout containers for their stainless-steel material and ability to tightly seal, in the future, they would opt for rectangular containers (instead of circular bowls) and a larger cup size.

The City of Middletown, in the scope of a future reusables program, would consider exploring different container types, including recyclable plastics, which could accommodate a wider array of container shapes and sizes. Recognizing the concerns among its residents, the City is contemplating ways to develop a reusables program without the necessity of an app.

POM, among its observations, noted customer reluctance towards the fixed rental period and would consider extending it beyond seven days. However, if reusables were the sole or most financially viable choice available, it could potentially encourage greater adoption.

To help build excitement and engagement around the program among staff, POM recommends offering incentives. For example, offering a prize to the employee who encourages the most customers to use reusables during their shift could be an effective strategy.

In the case of this pilot, and other voluntary reusable takeout container programs, customers more frequently chose the single-use container option instead of the reusable takeout container. If POM could repeat the pilot, they would prioritize building awareness among their customer base about restaurant takeout waste and its negative impacts. Once the community is more tuned into this issue, they may be more likely to participate in potential solutions. This could be done in partnership with a local nonprofit organization and/or government representative. To further maximize the success of a reusables program, it would also need to be integrated into food establishments' online ordering systems.

When multiple restaurants are involved in a reusables program, it is beneficial to have a community partner, such as a local nonprofit organization, to help facilitate the program and check in with restaurants as needed. Throughout the pilot, the City of Middletown's Recycling Coordinator, CET, and the container company engaged in regular check-ins to discuss progress and challenges.

Future Ideas & Opportunities

Some reusable container models and opportunities that POM is considering for the future include:

- **Deposit system:** Customers put a deposit down to rent a reusable container from a restaurant. When the customer returns the container, they receive the deposit back.
- **Point-of-sale integration:** This approach is advantageous in restaurant settings that use certain common point-of-sale systems, because it enables container rental to smoothly integrate into existing restaurant operations, and customers would not have to download an app. [DeliverZero](#) is one example of reusable container service provider that is integrated with widely used point-of-sale systems in foodservice settings.

The reusable movement in the City of Middletown is just beginning! Wesleyan University is also building momentum for reusables in Middletown through its [reusable takeout program with ReUser](#). Participation incentives and opportunities that the City of Middletown is considering for the future include:

- Adopting an ordinance that encourages reusable foodware containers by banning or implementing a charge on single-use containers. For example, Marin County in California has a [Reusable Foodware Ordinance](#) that uses the hierarchy of: reusables (best), compostable fiber foodware (compliant), and single-use plastics (prohibited). The City of Newton, Massachusetts has a [Sustainable Food & Beverage Serviceware, Packaging & Single Use Items Ordinance](#) that prohibits food establishments from offering foam polystyrene containers and requires that to-go items be reusable, recyclable, or compostable.
- Offering a centralized dishwashing service, which could allow restaurants without washing capabilities to participate in a reusables program.