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Small Communities, Big Impact: Practical Waste Diversion Models That Work

Diverting waste has long been a challenge for small businesses and communities, where barriers like cost, access, and limited resources can make meaningful change difficult. Yet these same pressures can often be the reason that waste diversion is needed more than ever.

In this resource, we highlight three small communities that have found practical ways to navigate challenges and implement practical and robust waste diversion programs amongst local businesses: Cold Spring, NY; Bethlehem, NH; and Clinton County, NY. Whether they are just getting started or expanding established reduction practices, these communities demonstrate that no matter where you are in your waste journey, the work is impactful and possible. Their approaches include donating surplus food to local food rescue organizations, separating food scraps for animal feed and composting, repurposing food scraps, and more. This work, funded by the USDA Rural Utilities Service (RUS), enables CET to partner with businesses and sustainability committees to implement successful strategies.

Cold Spring, NY

In towns where many businesses rely on seasonal tourism, it can be challenging for small businesses to set aside time to address waste solutions. In Cold Spring, NY, the Chamber of Commerce partnered with CET to host a Waste Reduction Action Day (WRAD) event with Senior Waste Reduction Consultant, Renee Panetta from CET to offer targeted support. Prior to CET's work with the community, Cold Spring had a robust residential food scrap drop-off program in place, giving the town a stepping stone to getting businesses on board as well.

Jeff Mikkleson, Advocacy Chair for the Cold Spring Chamber of Commerce, initiated the effort when he reached out to [CET's NY Hotline](#) to gauge the feasibility of a commercial food scrap recycling program for local businesses. Since then, CET was able to assist ten businesses and institutions: Cathryn's Tuscan Grill, Cold Springs Farmers' Market, Foundry Montessori School, the Garrison Institute, Haldane Central School District, Marbled Meat Shop, Signal Fire Bread, Sweet E's, Understory Market, and Vera's.

Haldane Schools' students and administration have worked diligently to ensure that the school's food scrap recovery program has "staying power." Principal Julia Sniffen joined forces with high school and middle school students to engage the rest of the school in its waste reduction efforts. As a result of these efforts, the school may divert as much as 17,000 pounds of wasted food annually. Student stakeholders of varying ages have ensured that this will become a legacy program in the district.

[Marbled Meat](#), a butcher and deli, had some very clear goals when they first started working with CET: divert unusable bones, fat, and vegetable waste that couldn't be used for stocks, minimize unnecessary single-use plastic, and teach customers to compost wasted food when dining in. The business already repurposed unsold items, such as bones for stock and soup, and used meat, cheese, and bread ends to make sausages. The shop also sends bones to animal sanctuaries and, in-house, has their oxidized meats made into dog food. The kibble has been so popular that they often struggle to keep it in stock! Spent waste oil is recovered and recycled by Buffalo Biodiesel, and when possible, fat is made into tallow and lard and sold in the shop.



CET expanded on those efforts by establishing a customer-facing food separation program for composting. Further signage was created for back-of-house to echo the effectiveness of their current practices and supplement new initiatives. CET also recommended switching to compostable serving materials to align with and support the business's composting system.

Not every business has the capacity to expand its waste practices beyond its own operations, but that is exactly what [Understory Market](#) set out to do. When working with CET, the business made it clear that it wanted to allow community members to dispose of organics in their bins. The business also expressed a desire to communicate its packaging preferences to its vendors, encouraging them to also focus on waste reduction as well.

Cold Spring has jumped into its waste diversion journey with enthusiasm and determination. While continuing the work they started with CET, the town was recently awarded a \$25,000 grant through Assemblymember Dana Levenberg's office to expand and extend its Commercial Food Scrap Recycling Pilot. This will hopefully allow Cold Spring to extend its support to a full 12 months.

Takeaway: The enthusiasm of participating businesses, coupled with the support of the Chamber of Commerce, are key factors in Cold Spring's success in reducing waste.



Bethlehem, NH

Nestled in New Hampshire's White Mountains, Bethlehem is a quintessential New England village. With a population of fewer than 3,000 people, it might not leave the biggest mark on the state's waste stream, but the results of their waste diversion efforts have a lasting impact on the local community.



The town began working with CET Waste Reduction Consultant, Emma Sabella, in 2021, after a volunteer from the town's Transfer Station Committee, subsequently joined by the Sustainability Working Group, reached out to CET. The local landfill is slated to close in 2027, and a new transfer station is in the works, prompting efforts from the town to divert as much waste as possible, cutting both household and town disposal costs and encouraging education on recycling, reusing, and repurposing. Emma identified several avenues for Bethlehem to immediately reduce and divert materials from disposal, including donating surplus food, sending food scraps for animal feed, and composting.

Key to CET's success in the community, Barry Zister of the Bethlehem Sustainability Working Group did in-person outreach to local food businesses. He introduced each one to Emma, naturally creating a successful collaboration between Barry, CET, and the businesses. Barry was instrumental in getting CET in the door, both when Emma visited in 2021 and again in 2025. Both times, Barry set up visits and accompanied Emma to each business. He also had established connections with local composters and food banks in the area.

Through a partnership with [Meadowstone Farm](#), [Rek-Lis Brewery](#) launched a food scrap collection program and is projected to divert 15,000 pounds annually. The partnership has been equally fruitful for the farm, with edible scraps given to their livestock and the remainder composted.

[Littleton Food Co-op](#) worked with CET to enhance food scrap collection in their dining area and employee breakroom. The market also started a surplus share shelf for staff and displays customized waste sorting signage, courtesy of CET.

[The Wayside Inn](#)—a 26-room lodging facility with an adjoining restaurant—implemented a fryer oil collection program with Amenico. The program diverts over a ton of used oil each year while reducing associated costs.



Takeaway: Bethlehem demonstrates how small communities can start with practical, business-specific solutions and build a network of local partnerships that keep materials in use and out of the waste stream.

Clinton County, NY

Clinton County's commitment to waste reduction is reflected in its sustained, multi-year approach. In 2023, the county applied for funding from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYDEC), taking advantage of newly available municipal grant opportunities.

With this assistance, Clinton County ran a community compost program in the Town and Village of Champlain, serving over 70 households and diverting over 2,000 pounds of food scraps so far. Though River Valley Regeneratives processes most of the food scraps, Casella Waste Systems provides support for hauling and logistics. Our Parents Family Farm also plays a role in collecting organic materials from local residents and businesses.



At the 2025 New York State Association for Reduction, Reuse, and Recycling (NYSAR3), Clinton County was highlighted for its continued reduction efforts. As a result, the county decided to organize WRAD events in several communities, with the assistance of CET. Businesses in Champlain and Rouses Point were able to receive in-person, practical waste reduction support from CET Waste Reduction Consultant Josh Enderle, facilitated by Cody Douglas, Clinton County's Senior Public Health Educator. Clinton County has worked with 10 food service establishments since the WRAD events.

Independent local action has also been taken, for example, by [Kay'Z Boba](#) in Plattsburgh. The coffee shop began tracking its daily wasted food in preparation for an annual wasted food assessment and diverted 3,200 pounds of food scraps in 2025 as a result.

The county's dedication to waste reduction and proven success over several years is a case study for other small communities looking to make the jump towards lasting waste reduction programs.

Takeaway: Clinton County shows how sustained funding, local leadership, and hands-on support can build long-term waste reduction programs that scale over time.



Summary

Small communities often face similar challenges when encouraging local businesses and institutions to establish waste reduction practices. It can be expensive, time-consuming, and difficult to get employees and customers on board. Whether it's one local community member to spark participation or an entire council, rural communities have a unique opportunity and perspective on waste reduction on a small-town level.



The examples from Cold Spring, Bethlehem, and Clinton County show that effective waste diversion does not require large-scale infrastructure. It starts with practical steps, local partnerships, and a willingness to test and expand what works.

If your town, business, or institution is ready to pursue impactful, cost-effective waste reduction practices, contact CET.



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