



ALL IN | TOWARD ZERO WASTE

Capitol Complex Recycling Upgrades - Frequently Asked Questions

To help employees understand and take advantage of the new recycling program, we've put together this collection of frequently asked questions (FAQs). If you have a question that's not listed here, contact us at capitol.recycling@state.mn.us.

What goes into the green bins labeled for organics recycling?

The green organics bins can take:

- Any type of food scraps
 - Including meat, dairy, and bones
- Non-recyclable paper
 - Such as napkins, paper towels, and paper plates (if they are not plastic lined)
- Compostable plastics
 - Look for the labels for the Biodegradable Plastics Institute (BPI) or Cedar Grove Composting to identify compostable plastics:



Note: We've made efforts to ensure that the food distributed in Capitol Complex Cafeterias is served with recyclable or compostable utensils and packaging. Look for the compostable label on forks, knives, spoons, and packaging and place them into the green organics recycling bin when you are done with them.

All of the materials described above are organic – meaning they were made from plants or animals. Organic materials account for over 60 percent of what we've been throwing away on the Capitol Complex. Our organics go to a large scale compost facility, which can take a wider array of items than you can compost at home.

For more on what can be recycled in the organics recycling bin, reference our [Organics Recycling Guide](#).



Minnesota Pollution
Control Agency

MINNESOTA
WASTE WISE
FOUNDATION

What items don't belong in the organics recycling bin?

The most common contamination issue is paper products that have a plastic lining. Items like frozen food boxes and plastic lined paper cups or plates don't work well in a composting operation. In previous years some composters have reluctantly accepted these types of materials, but most have now decided it is better to keep them out. So unless you're sure a product is unlined, or have an assurance it is lined with a compostable lining, it should go in the trash.

Plastics can also be a source of contamination. We've worked with the cafeterias at the Capitol Complex to acquire plastics that have been certified to work in composting operations. A truly compostable plastic should have a logo from an organization like BPI or Cedar Grove Composting.



If the item does not include a compostable label, please do not place it in the organics recycling bin.

What goes into the blue bins labeled for recycling?

Recyclables (the blue bins) are sorted into two categories: "Paper" and "Bottles, Cans & Containers." Here's a quick rundown of the items you should place into the recycling bins for these two categories:

- **Paper**
 - Office Paper
 - Mail, Magazines, and Catalogs
 - Newspapers
 - Boxboard (cereal boxes, tissue boxes, etc.)
 - Cardboard (if too large, collapse and place next to the bin)
 - Envelopes
 - Notebooks and notepads

Note: Items like staples, tape, and envelope 'windows' do not need to be removed.

- **Bottles, Cans & Containers**
 - Plastic bottles (empty of liquid and place cap back on the bottle)
 - Aluminum, steel, and tin cans
 - Glass bottles and jars
 - Milk and soup cartons
 - Plastic cups and tubs (#1,#2, #4 or #5)
 - Plastic containers (#1,#2, #4 or #5)
 - Plastic packaging (#1,#2, #4 or #5)

Note: Please rinse containers to remove food residue when necessary.

For a more detailed list of what can be recycled, visit mn.gov/admin/recycling and refer to our Quick Reference Guide.

What kinds of containers can go into the “Bottles, Cans, and Containers” bin?

Our new recycling program accepts many other types of plastic packaging like cups, yogurt tubs, and take out containers. If the plastic package has a #1, #2, #4, or #5 on it please rinse it and place it in the “Bottles, Cans & Containers” recycling bin. Some examples can be seen in the photos below:



The Capitol Complex’s recycling program can also accept milk cartons, soup cartons, and juice boxes. Empty all liquids before placing the carton in the “Bottles, Cans & Containers” bin. Some examples of these products can be seen in the image below:



The new program can also accept plastic bags for recycling, but plastic bags **should not go** into the same bin as “Bottles, Cans & Containers.” Each building will have a few separate bins for plastic bag collection, as commingling plastic bags with other recyclables causes problems at sorting facilities. The next question below provides more information on plastic bags.

Many of the plastics in the Capitol Complex cafeterias are made from compostable plastics – compostable plastics can be placed in the green bins for organics recycling. Read more in the subsequent questions about the organic recycling bin.

There are still some plastic items that are not recyclable. **Do not** recycle plastic knives, forks, or spoons. The forks, knives, and spoons at the Capitol Complex cafeterias are all compostable, so they can go in the organics bin. Plastic forks, knives, and spoons from elsewhere belong in the trash unless they are labeled as compostable. Don’t recycle items that are not packaging – such as coat hangers, buckets, floppy disks, or broken sunglasses – in the recycling bin.

How do I dispose of ink/toner cartridges?

Empty toner and ink cartridges contain leftover materials that make their disposal hazardous to the environment. However these items are **very** recyclable and reusable if they are cleaned out.

Toner cartridges can generally be recycled via take-back programs through ink/toner suppliers or copy machine service providers. If you have not done so already, please contact these entities and inquire about the free take-back programs already in place.

If there is no safe and available way to dispose of the cartridges within your divisions, Staples or Office Depot provide a free drop-off recycling service. Alternatively, there are many companies throughout the Twin Cities Metro area that can be contacted for pick-up of ink/toner cartridges. Depending on the service or company, there may be a fee for recycling and disposal.

How do I dispose of plastic shopping bags?

With the recycling upgrades agencies will now be able to recycle plastic bags and plastic film (like stretch wrap), but each building on the Capitol Complex will have a few special bins for these items. You should dispose of your plastic bags only in these plastic bag recycling bins. The bags should be clean and dry. Do not include plastic bags in the bins for recyclable paper and bottles, cans, and containers. Plastic bags can cause problems at sorting facilities when they are mixed with other types of recyclables.

The special bins for plastic bags are generally located in break rooms, cafeterias, or vending areas. Reference our website at mn.gov/admin/recycling or contact us at capitol.recycling@state.mn.us to determine where your building's bins are located.

Also keep in mind, it is even better for the environment when you opt to not use a plastic bag. Consider a reusable shopping bag or decline to use a bag for small purchases.

What should I do if I don't know if an item is recyclable or compostable?

Do your best to learn what can go into the recycling bins. Details about what items are acceptable and not acceptable are listed on our website at mn.gov/admin/recycling – check out our quick reference guide posted there or read the [“How to Recycle” tab](#). If you are still not sure or have questions about a specific item's suitability for the recycling or organics bin, please email us at capitol.recycling@state.mn.us.

If you are not confident that an item belongs in a recycling bin, and can't use one of the above resources to figure it out, throw it in the trash. Contaminating the recycling bin with non-recyclable items diminishes quality of the recyclable products and increases costs.

Are employees really expected to empty their own trash cans now?

Yes, each employee will be provided with a paper recycling bin and a smaller unlined trash bin in their office or cubical. Each employee will be responsible for emptying their own trash, recycling, and organics at one of the centralized collection stations. In general, employees will have access to a centralized recycling station within 25 to 50 feet of their work station.

Why do I have to empty my own trash?

While state employees have not been responsible for emptying their own trash, they have long been responsible for emptying their own recycling. With the addition of organics recycling to the complex the vast majority – about 96 percent – of the items that staff throw away are recyclable or compostable.

Other organizations have had success asking employees to take personal responsibility for the waste they generate. Almost every organization that has implemented this approach has seen recycling rates increase. Having custodians empty trash cans, especially when only about four percent of the items employees discard belong in the trash, is not a wise use of resources and suppresses our recycling rates.

When evaluating the Capitol Complex's existing trash and recycling program, we physically dug through and analyzed the trash from Capitol Complex facilities. We discovered that a large portion of the trash was comprised of trash bags with only one or two (generally recyclable or compostable) items inside. It became clear the way we were collecting trash was hindering the recycling effort. So we looked at other workplaces and modeled our effort off the highest performing programs. Those programs universally do not have custodians empty trash for employees at each desk, instead using centralized containers. They also use either a very small trash can or none at all at each individual employee workstation.



Is having only a small trash can at my desk really going to work?

Yes. Many organizations including Dakota County, Hennepin County, the City of Minneapolis, the Science Museum of Minnesota, HealthPartners, and Cushman Wakefield have implemented similar programs. Prior to implementation, almost all of them heard concerns that employees would be less productive, have issues with cleanliness, or encounter other problems. But the reality was different – some complained loudly at first, but in general employees adjusted quickly. Recycling rates increased and employees communicated that the impact to their day was minimal. Issues related to unsanitary workstations did not significantly increase.

Furthermore, getting up to move around once in a while supports health and wellness efforts in our offices. In most areas of our lives – such as at home, or at the store – we tend to have to walk a short distance to discard recycling or trash.

If my trash bin stinks or gets dirty are you going to wash it for me?

Employees are responsible for emptying and cleaning their own trash container. The types of items that typically add odor or create a mess in trash bins are almost exclusively food wastes. Those items should be disposed of in the organics recycling bin instead of your personal trash bin. You can avoid this issue

by walking to a nearby central collection station when you have organic items to discard. If you wait to bring items to the central collection station (at the end of the day or every couple days), you may have to clean your container more frequently.

Many organizations have successfully implemented this type of system and none have had significant issues with odors, mess, or pests when they asked employees to take responsibility for their own containers.

Will organics recycling increase issues with pests, like flies and rodents?

No, organics will be emptied daily by custodial staff. The type of waste we generate won't change simply because we have organics recycling; flies and rodents should be no more attracted to the food scraps just because they are in a different container. In other words, issues should be no more prominent than they were before we began organics recycling.

However, staff are now responsible for emptying their own trash, and we hope every person will recycle their organics. If an employee stores organic materials in their deskside trash bin, we recommend emptying the container daily. Employees continue to be responsible for maintaining a clean workstation. Many other organizations have had success with this model, so we're confident state employees will make it work too!

How can I plan a waste free meeting?

With access to both traditional and organics recycling, planning a low- or no-waste meeting is easy.

Using reusable, washable mugs, plates, and silverware is always the most environmentally friendly option. If using reusable goods is not an option, seek out recyclable or compostable packaging.

Compostable products are available on state contract. For compostable food service ware (including plates, cups, utensils, etc.), use Contract Release F-535(5). For compostable bags, use Contract Release B-351(5). To access the contracts, you will need to log in to the Department of Admin's Materials Management Division website at www.mmd.admin.state.mn.us/process/contract. If you don't have a log in, contact your agency's purchasing staff. If any of your meeting attendees are visitors, take a moment to explain our recycling program and highlight our efforts to prevent waste, in case they are not familiar with recycling and composting practices.

If you have additional questions about sustainable purchasing, please contact the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's (MPCA) sustainable purchasing specialist, Johanna Kertesz. Johanna can be reached at 651-757-2489 or johanna.kertesz@state.mn.us.

The promotional materials indicate the Capitol Complex is "All In Toward Zero Waste." Does that mean we have to recycle everything?

Not necessarily. The term "Zero Waste" has been used by a number of organizations and is sometimes interpreted differently.

Our immediate goal is to meet a 90 percent recycling rate for the Capitol Complex, an aggressive but achievable improvement over the 70 percent recycling rate we've been averaging in recent years. We know it's achievable because a thorough, hands-on analysis of the Capitol Complex's trash showed that about 96 percent of what we throw away could be recycled or composted.

The improvements made to the Capitol Complex's recycling program were designed to address the gaps encountered in that analysis. In tandem with those improvements, we've also begun adjusting our purchasing processes to ensure the items we acquire and eventually discard are suitable for composting. For example, cafeterias on the Capitol Complex have made changes so their products will all be recyclable or compostable going forward.

As we approach our 90 percent goal, we'll continue to evaluate our programs and identify opportunities to address remaining items that are not being recycled or composted. Based on our analysis, we recognize that maximizing our recycling potential means eventually achieving a recycling rate above 95 percent and moving toward zero waste!

In the meantime, we're challenging every employee to leverage the new recycling programs and help us progress toward the current 90 percent goal and beyond – hence the message “All In Toward Zero Waste.”

Why is increasing our recycling rate so important?

The Minnesota legislature sets recycling goals that state agencies must meet. They recently updated our goals, requiring agencies in the Twin Cities metro area to achieve a recycling rate of 75 percent or higher by 2030. But beyond this alone, we know that recycling has real economic, operational, and environmental benefits.

Recycling helps our state's economy. A study by the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency found that approximately 60,000 jobs in Minnesota are directly and indirectly supported by the recycling industry. These jobs pay an estimated \$3.4 billion in wages and add nearly \$15.7 billion in sales to Minnesota's economy. Recycling also saves money. If the Capitol Complex recycled 90 percent or more of its waste, we'd reduce disposal costs by more than \$33,000. Finally, recycling helps our environment and preserves it for future generations. Attaining a recycling rate of 90 percent on the Capitol Complex would save enough energy to heat, cool, and power 48 households for a year, which is equal to 42,772 gallons of gasoline.

What happens to the paper and plastic we recycle?

The Capitol Complex's recyclable materials are collected on-site and transported to a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) where they are sorted out into their individual material streams. From here they are compacted, baled, and sold to be used in the production of new materials.

Recycled paper and cardboard is recycled into paper packaging, newsprint, toilet paper, and much more. Recycled plastics are recycled into everything from new bottles, to carpet, and plastic-based building products. Aluminum cans are often recycled into new cans within 60 days! Recycled steel can become

car parts, appliances, and even rebar for bridges. Your recycled cans are currently being used in rebar for the new Stillwater Bridge!

The Capitol Complex contracts with non-profit [AccessAbility Incorporated](#) for the hauling and sorting of our recycled goods.

What happens to the organics we recycle?

Our recycled organics are taken to a large scale compost facility, also referred to as a commercial composting facility. Here, this material is piled high and long into windrows and consistently turned and monitored for moisture content and temperature. In about one year, this material is decomposed enough that it can be sold as nutrient-rich compost to help plants grow, control erosion, and retain moisture in soils.



When we throw food away, it becomes waste that we have to manage at a landfill or incinerator. If we compost our food scraps instead, they become a useful product, not waste we have to manage. Turning it into compost has numerous benefits. Compost can hold 20 times its weight in water, making it perfect for both drought relief and erosion control in new construction and road projects. Compost helps to filter and clean polluted water and soil. And compost provides chemical-free nutrients (especially free of nitrogen) which help plants grow and reduce the need for synthetic fertilizers.

In fact, Admin will be using compost from the Capitol Complex's organics recycling as fertilizer for the flowers planted on the State Capitol grounds each spring.

Learn more about large scale composting by watching this brief video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=v37Wo-eo7ik.