



# A Critical Look at the City of Tucson Zero Waste Roadmap

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## Introduction

On July 13, 2021, Mayor Romero and the City Council tasked the Tucson Environmental Services (TES) department with developing a zero waste plan for the city that would attain 50% waste diversion by 2030 and achieve zero waste by 2050. On September 1, 2022, TES posted a roadmap on the City of Tucson website, setting forth an action plan and schedule for developing the zero waste plan ([www.tucsonaz.gov/tucsonzw](http://www.tucsonaz.gov/tucsonzw)). The Zero Waste Roadmap consists of nine tasks that were approved by the Mayor and City Council at a study session on September 14, 2021.

The good news is that managing our discards more sustainably is finally getting attention at the highest levels of City government. The bad news is that TES began work on implementing the roadmap without first seeking public input on policies, programs and infrastructure that could help Tucson (and eventually the surrounding region) achieve zero waste.

Over the last six months, TES has completed the first five tasks in the Zero Waste Roadmap. These tasks are largely centered around the identification and prioritization of downstream waste management processing technologies, near-term development options and alternative uses of waste material that could be developed at the Los Reales regional landfill, managed by the City of Tucson. Unfortunately, these initial planning tasks have been conducted behind closed doors.

During this period, TES has made no effort to educate the public on the roadmap, nor has the department provided an opportunity for local and regional stakeholders to be involved in the initial tasks. It's only now—seven months after the process was launched—that TES has invited the public to provide ideas and suggestions for reducing and diverting waste through a survey distributed by the Mayor's Office (<https://form.jotform.com/222444575974062>).

The biggest drawback of the Zero Waste Roadmap is that the community survey and upcoming visioning workshops come at the end of the planning process, after the first five tasks have been completed. Additionally, TES has already begun to consider and implement downstream waste processing projects at the Los Reales landfill. These include:

- Building a concrete pad for a mixed-waste processing facility, which is a one-bin system where the consumer places all trash and recyclables in one bin with no separation. These materials then are hauled to a sorting facility where workers and machinery glean recyclables. The department has not disclosed whether this “all-in-one” collection system would replace or augment the existing single-stream recycling program.
- Holding private discussions with vendors and contractors that would like to build waste-to-energy incineration facilities at the Los Reales landfill—including combustion, pyrolysis and refuse-derived fuel systems that would release greenhouse gas emissions and toxic substances into the atmosphere.

By contrast, other communities with zero waste initiatives (e.g., Portland, Fort Collins, Austin and Pittsburgh) have brought together individuals from diverse constituencies (e.g., residents, businesses, community organizations, environmental groups, reuse organizations, recycling/composting operators and waste haulers) at the onset of the planning process to help identify needs, goals and guiding principles. These communities treated stakeholders as “equal partners” from the beginning by including them in each planning task to identify new ways to help reduce and divert waste materials and evaluate those options in a transparent, community-based approach.

Engaging stakeholder groups at the beginning of the City’s zero waste planning process would have provided valuable insight to inform and address the pressing waste and climate issues facing the community. It would also have provided a strategic framework for identifying and prioritizing zero waste options, including materials recovery, reuse and remanufacturing opportunities at Los Reales.

ZW planning is similar to other types of city planning (e.g., developing plans for transportation, community development and water resources). It includes steps for analyzing the current situation, identifying and evaluating options, and selecting the preferred options. We need a transparent and inclusive planning process for zero waste, such as we have seen with other City initiatives.

Consider Move Tucson, the city-wide transportation master plan for improving mobility choices (<https://movetucson.org/>). The City opened the Move Tucson process by hosting a series of stakeholder advisory group meetings, virtual town halls, interactive webpages and community surveys that provided early opportunities for the public to learn about and participate in the planning process. As a result, the updated transportation plan reflects diverse community-

enhancing concepts and projects, in contrast to road infrastructure aimed at the narrow purpose of moving more vehicles more quickly through the city,

### Specific Shortcomings of the Zero Waste Roadmap

- TES did not publicize or invite stakeholder groups to attend the Zero Waste Roadmap kickoff meeting.
- TES has not defined “zero waste” or established a sustainable materials management hierarchy to guide the initial steps of the planning process.
- The current system/baseline data assessment (Planning Task #2) includes a waste characterization analysis that relies on outdated and unrepresentative information.
- The baseline assessment does not:
  - Account for the vast network of reuse and recycling vendors in the community, including thrift stores, scrap dealers, repair shops, compost operators and local manufacturers that use scrap materials.
  - Include information on food loss prevention and waste reduction programs (e.g., food donation, rescue and redistribution) that help divert methane-producing organic materials from the landfill.
  - Contain information on local businesses and organizations that provide alternative product delivery systems, such as refillable and reusable containers.
  - Provide a complete inventory and map of all the existing recycling and composting operations in the community.
  - Identify the number of municipal staff involved in conducting outreach, education and compliance activities for the City’s residential recycling program.
- The aspirational programs report (Planning Task #3) omits information on best practices used by other cities to educate and engage stakeholder groups in developing a zero waste plan.
- TES has not shared information on the project proposals that were submitted under the RFI for alternative uses of materials at Los Reales (Planning Task #4), nor has it disclosed the list of downstream waste management processing technologies that were selected for the processing technology overview (Planning Task #6).

### Conclusion

The City of Tucson and surrounding communities need to make deep, sustained cuts in greenhouse gas emissions to address the growing climate crisis. Transitioning to a zero waste future—one in which less waste is produced overall—is one of the quickest, easiest and most effective ways for cities to cut carbon pollution. Upstream measures to reduce waste and sustainably manage what’s left through recycling and composting not only reduce greenhouse gases from landfilling, they also reduce the life-cycle emissions associated with producing goods and food (including those from raw materials, manufacture, distribution, retail and disposal) that are consumed in the city.

Becoming a zero waste community requires a transparent and inclusive planning process that engages the entire community in identifying, evaluating and prioritizing strategies for reducing the generation and disposal of waste. These tasks should not be left to TES and its engineering consultant. Our local businesses, institutions, community groups and citizens have unique knowledge, networks and experiences that can help make our community more sustainable and resilient.

There's still time to provide stakeholder groups with meaningful and consistent engagement throughout the City's zero waste planning process. Providing robust citizen involvement in each of the planning tasks will foster a sense of ownership among the entire community, create the opportunity for consensus-building, and lead to the successful implementation of truly sustainable projects that minimize waste and conserve resources.