

March 2, 2023

MEMORANDUM

To: Transportation and Seattle Public Utilities Committee
From: Brian Goodnight, Analyst
Subject: Resolution 32082: 2022 Solid Waste Plan Update

On March 7, 2023, the Transportation and Seattle Public Utilities Committee will consider and possibly vote on [Resolution \(RES\) 32082](#), which would adopt the *2022 Solid Waste Plan Update: Moving Upstream to Zero Waste (2022–2027)* (2022 Plan Update) as the City’s solid waste management plan. The committee received a presentation on the contents of the plan from Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) at its February 21 meeting.

This memorandum: a) provides background information on state requirements for solid waste plans and previous Council actions, b) summarizes the goals and recommendations in the plan, c) describes how SPU is centering racial equity in its solid waste planning, d) highlights SPU’s intention to shift its focus away from a weight-based recycling rate towards other metrics that consider the entire life cycle of materials, and e) describes next steps.

Background

State law ([Chapter 70A.205 Revised Code of Washington \(RCW\)](#)) requires that local governments review and revise, if necessary, their solid waste management plans every five years. The chapter also specifies the content that must be addressed in the plans (e.g., an inventory of all existing solid waste facilities, a program for surveillance and control, and the projected solid waste collection needs for the next six years) and the review and approval processes.

Since 1989, the City’s solid waste activities have been guided by adopted solid waste management plans. Previous plans were adopted by the Council in 1988 ([RES 27871](#)), 1998 ([RES 29805](#)), 2005 ([RES 30750](#)), and most recently in 2013 ([RES 31426](#)), which is known as the *2011 Solid Waste Plan Revision*. In 2016, SPU and the City’s Solid Waste Advisory Committee (SWAC)¹ initiated a review of the *2011 Solid Waste Plan Revision* and began drafting an amendment, but the amendment process was never concluded and was ultimately impacted by the pandemic in 2020. Following those delays, the Department of Ecology updated its guidance and required SPU to submit a revision to the solid waste management plan, rather than an amendment. The revised plan is the 2022 Plan Update that the Executive has proposed for adoption via Resolution 32082.

¹ The Solid Waste Advisory Committee is an advisory body mandated by state law, [RCW 70A.205.110](#), to provide recommendations and informed advice regarding solid waste management issues.

Summary

The 2022 Plan Update describes how Seattle will manage and finance solid waste services and facilities in the near-term and projects system management needs over a 20-year planning period. The 2022 Plan Update prioritizes waste prevention and presents a vision of a zero-waste future where all materials are reused or recycled, and nothing is wasted. The vision for zero waste is consistent with SPU's 2021–2026 Strategic Business Plan, adopted by Council in May 2021 via [RES 32000](#).

The plan identifies seven goal areas to guide solid waste management:

1. Racial equity: center racial equity in the 2022 Plan Update and provide racially equitable, inclusive, and culturally competent services
2. Affordability: provide services that are affordable, efficient, and cost-effective
3. Environmental impact: minimize global and life cycle environmental impacts of materials and activities
4. Risk and resiliency: plan, adapt, and respond to disruptions, changes, and opportunities
5. Safety: provide services and facilities that are safe, clean, and secure
6. Operational excellence: provide operational excellence in core service delivery
7. Markets: support development of strong and resilient waste prevention, recycling, and composting markets to maximize environmental benefits

Additionally, the 2022 Plan Update recommends 39 actions for Seattle to continue progressing in solid waste management. To illustrate the types of recommendations that the plan includes, three recommendations are listed below:

- Recommendation 3 – Expand solid waste data analytics, metrics, and evaluation to improve assessment of services and operations.
- Recommendation 7 – Expand efforts to rescue safe, edible food from the waste stream by getting it to those that need it most.
- Recommendation 23 – Adopt collection infrastructure incentives or requirements in multifamily construction to ensure tenants have sufficient solid waste services and convenient access to solid waste containers.

The majority of the recommendations (34 of them) are considered by SPU as achievable in the short-term, defined as within the next five years. The remaining five recommendations are focused on a longer-term planning period of five years or more. The plan's Executive Summary contains a table that compiles all 39 recommendations by chapter and provides the relevant page numbers of the plan for additional information.

The 2022 Plan Update also addresses how SPU will administer and finance the solid waste services described in the plan, and it projects the revenue and rate impacts through the year 2040 of a status quo scenario and a scenario where SPU is able to implement the recommended actions. In short, both scenarios will require rate increases over time, but the revenue requirements are estimated to be higher under the status quo scenario than if SPU implements the recommendations. Page 10.26 of the plan states: “Under the status quo, rates will increase to cover inflation and any new services or investments. The recommendations have new implementation costs, but they also reduce garbage tons moving through the system. Cost savings from less garbage more than offsets new implementation costs, thus reducing the overall revenue requirement.” In summary, if SPU is able to implement the recommendations in the 2022 Plan Update, customer rates through 2040 are estimated to increase more slowly than if the recommendations are not implemented.

Equity Focus

To properly consider racial equity during the development of the 2022 Plan Update, the project team partnered with SPU’s Environmental Justice and Service Equity (ESJE) team. The ESJE team works with SPU and partner departments to realize the commitments of the City’s Race and Social Justice Initiative, with the goal of supporting SPU in delivering racially inclusive and equitable services. Staff partnered with the ESJE team to conduct a Racial Equity Toolkit (RET) early in the development of the plan, apply the RET as a guiding framework for stakeholder engagement, and consider disproportionate impacts of systemic and institutional racism on people of color, low-income individuals, immigrants and refugees, and English language learners.

As described on page 1.23, “a key outcome of applying the Racial Equity Toolkit in the development of the 2022 Plan Update was to develop an overarching recommendation to make racial equity a core tenet of solid waste planning in Seattle...” That recommendation states: “Lead with race and incorporate racial justice in solid waste programs, education, and outreach in support of SPU’s commitment to providing racially equitable, inclusive, and culturally competent services.”

This effort to center racial equity shows up in other places throughout the plan as well. For example:

- Page 1.29 – SPU’s Community Connections program funds “multi-year partnerships with trusted organizations that serve a variety of ethnic and language groups to gather community input and to adapt and deliver in-language presentations and activities. Community Connections partners provided input and recommendations for how customers who are people of color, low-income, immigrants, and refugees participate in the decision-making and policy development process to improve service delivery, provide for culturally relevant education and outreach programs, and provide input to future development of waste prevention activities and product stewardship legislation.”

- Page 6.16 – With regard to missed single-family solid waste collections, SPU performed a statistical study and found that after controlling for customer density, frequency of special services including backyard collection, and the ratio of multifamily to single-family residents, there was no statistically significant relationship between missed collections and the percentage of people of color in a neighborhood.
- Page 9.3 – SPU is continuing to grow its use of community-centered approaches for outreach and education, including community-led design and community-based social marketing. For example, “Seattle now provides more in-language, culturally relevant, and picture-based signage for solid waste carts and containers than ever before. SPU uses transcreation to provide audience-specific outreach and education.” Additionally, the City’s collection contractors are required to provide “door-to-door tenant education and develop an overall outreach campaign with an emphasis on reaching people of color, people who speak Tier 1 languages (Cantonese, Korean, Mandarin, Somali, Spanish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese), and people born between the years 1981 and 1996.”

Recycling Rate & Performance Metrics

The City’s solid waste management plans have included a weight-based recycling rate goal since 1988, with the original plan setting a recycling rate target of 60 percent for commercial, residential, and self-haul waste by 1998. As a point of reference for this target, Chapter 2 of the plan notes that the city’s recycling rate in 1987 was only 24 percent. Figure 2.3 in the 2022 Plan Update charts the city’s recycling performance over time and shows the recycling rate increasing from about 40 percent in 2000 to a high of 59 percent in 2016.

In July 2007, the Council adopted [RES 30990](#), known as the zero waste resolution, which established goals and actions in support of zero waste, including revised recycling rate targets and a waste prevention goal. The resolution reaffirmed the 60 percent recycling rate goal with a target of 2012 and established a 70 percent target for 2025. The 70 percent target date was later accelerated to 2022 through the adoption of the *2011 Solid Waste Plan Revision*, but the city has never been able to exceed the 2016 recycling rate of 59 percent. SPU’s presentation to the Committee on February 21 provided additional information with regard to why the recycling rate targets have never been met, but some of the factors likely include a shift to lighter weight materials (e.g., plastic bottles) and the changing composition of the waste stream (e.g., smaller amounts of newspaper and phone books).

As the city has struggled to meet its recycling goals, the 2022 Plan Update also acknowledges that SPU has been shifting its focus over time toward minimizing waste further upstream in the life cycle of materials to reduce environmental and human health impacts. In contrast to traditional solid waste management practices that focus primarily on end-of-life management of waste, considering the entire life cycle of materials includes design, extraction of raw materials, production and transport, use and repair, and end-of-life management. This shifting focus to a more sustainable materials management framework is consistent with the actions of

other solid waste industry leaders, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Ecology, and the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

In recognition of this shifting focus and changes to the waste stream, the 2022 Plan Update notes that although SPU will continue to track recycling rates for each waste sector, the recycling rate will no longer be the primary data point for program-related decision making. Additionally, Section 2 of the proposed resolution explicitly supersedes the recycling goals established in RES 30990 and states that SPU “will use metrics such as waste generation and capture rates to measure its work and track citywide waste trends.”

The 2022 Plan Update notes that “developing tools and methodologies to accurately capture the change in focus and priorities further upstream... will require innovative and groundbreaking work in the next two to three years. SPU will need to develop new performance metrics and targets to establish current baselines and track progress.” The Council will have the ability to track SPU’s progress in developing new performance metrics and targets through annual reporting, as Section 3 of the proposed resolution requires SPU to report to the Council by October 1 of each year on the previous year’s progress preventing, reducing, and diverting waste.

Next Steps

If the Committee recommends passage of the legislation to the Council on March 7, then the Council could take final action on Resolution 32082 as soon as March 14.

Assuming the Council adopts the legislation approving the 2022 Plan Update, SPU will subsequently submit the plan to the Department of Ecology for its final approval.

If the Committee or the Council makes substantive changes to the 2022 Plan Update prior to adoption, then the City’s SWAC would need to hold a meeting to review the changes prior to SPU submitting the plan to the Department of Ecology for approval. Although the SWAC is required to hold a meeting to review the changes, the group is not required to approve of the changes.

cc: Esther Handy, Director
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