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FEATURED

City Council OKs curbside compost pilot program for Athens

One council member expresses doubts about program's cost and need

By Kayla Beard May 16, 2018



A file photo of compost at the Athens-Hocking Organics facility near The Plains. Provided photo.

Athens residents soon will have the option to register for a pilot program that will allow compostable materials to be picked up weekly with trash and recycling.

The residential curbside compost project “would be a six-month pilot program” spearheaded by the Rural Action Zero Waste Program, Athens City Council member Kent Butler explained during a special council meeting Monday night. The pilot would run this year from July 1 through Dec. 1, and utilize \$46,000 from the city's garbage fund.

City Council adopted the ordinance five to one, with Patrick McGee dissenting. Council member Sam Crowl was not present for the vote.

The Rural Action Zero Waste Program has been working with the city of Athens for the past year to develop the program, which was enabled by an excess in the city's trash and recycling fund, Zero Waste Program Manager Andrea Reany explained at a meeting in March. The pilot program's goal is to have 200 to 300 families participating, with ideally 50 to 75 families in each of four residential areas throughout the city, Reany said.

Athens Hocking Recycling Centers would be the service provider for the project, as it is for its recycling and garbage pickup services. Any long-term project would be considered after the pilot is evaluated.

Council Member Chris Fahl praised the program on Monday evening. "I just say yay to the people who came with this. It's another thing Athens is doing... making our city sustainable, reducing the cost to taxpayers," she said. Even though there's "a cost to the city for doing this project," Fahl said, "every single pound of garbage that does not go to the landfill is less money for us (to spend). Landfill tipping fees are only going to go up."

The pilot project also will help improve the city's carbon footprint and encourage more people to compost, teaching people about composting along the way, Fahl said. "You may not think about composting but... maybe it will start (encouraging) people who want to compost in their backyard... I think this is awesome, pushing us forward."

Council member McGee, however, said he's "been opposed" – despite the fact that he recently joined Rural Action and already composts himself. McGee argued that the proposal is "an ineffective attempt to deal with a problem." He expressed doubt over the costs – the initial \$46,000 and the "anticipated cost" of \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year thereafter.

"I believe there are some other options to deal with this," he said.

McGee said it would help "our gardens and our lawns and our property if people would just learn to compost themselves, rather than transporting this compost around... where eventually some citizens would have the opportunity to get a few bags of compost out of their tax money."

He cast doubt on the purported carbon-footprint reduction benefits as well, arguing that "the more we use transportation services to provide this kind of service, I think, the more carbon problems we create.

"It would be premature to approve this" pilot, he concluded.

Though she doesn't usually weigh in on issues in her role as council president, Chris Knisely noted that she had some questions and concerns as well, but that "my questions have been reasonably answered."

She pointed out that "it is a pilot program" and that "as we evaluate the program with Rural Action, we'll also be taking into account: what is the long term cost, at what point might rate increases come through, and the fact that a continuation of the program beyond the pilot

probably would be some kind of for-pay (program)."

Fahl added that the recycling program started "in a very similar way," where residents pay a fee for the service, and that she thinks "the majority of people will support that."

Council member Butler said he sees the pilot as an opportunity to "partner with a nonprofit organization" who has already "done the research and some of the dirty work to see if this is possible." He too, supports the idea that a pilot could provide data for further evaluation, listing some communities "much larger than ours that have successful composting programs," including Milwaukee, Boston and Sacramento.

"There's models out there where this is happening, and I think that it's an exciting endeavor for us to consider," Butler said. "If it doesn't work... then we know we've tried."

Mayor Steve Patterson said that "as of the beginning of last week," the number of people who have volunteered for the pilot program "was already up to more than 80, and we had only put the announcement out I think a week prior to that." Some of those who have shown interest in the pilot "have indicated to me, they do compost," Patterson said. "But to have this convenience" of someone else doing the work "was an interesting thing to find out." So there are some "mixed reviews" about whether the pilot would be worse than home composting, Patterson said, agreeing that "at the end of the day, it is a carbon-footprint issue."

Patterson argued that the pilot could also be used to consider the feasibility of methane, generated from compost material, being used to generate electricity. "I think it's a little short-sighted to think that it's just a pilot and it may not be worthwhile in the long run... There could be some other things that come into play in the not-too-distant future," he said.

In the end, the arguments didn't persuade McGee, who said he is "a little suspicious of pilot programs," reminding fellow council members of a pilot program for the solar compressor garbage receptacles that now grace uptown sidewalks, and how the city had "spent over \$100,000 for that.

"We've never, to my knowledge, had a report indicating how much the city has saved... My point is that a lot of spending gets in under the loophole of pilot programs," McGee said. "I think this would be a fantastic program" if it were encouraging citizens to compost for themselves.

He added, however, "I think this is set up to just be an enlarging, I hate to say it, growing government kind of situation. I think it's not what the citizens want; it's not what the taxpayers certainly want."

Residents interested in participating in the pilot program can sign up now through mid-June via the city's website. The pilot is free to participants, though spots are limited.