

Key findings of public comments on the draft Zero Waste Plan

About the public comment process

Feedback on the draft Zero Waste Plan was gathered from February 21 to March 20, 2023.

Anyone interested in the Zero Waste Plan was encouraged to provide comments. In total, 69 participants attended the online meeting, 333 people completed the survey, and 8 letters or emails, and 111 action alert forms were received. Feedback was received from residents and representatives of 24 cities in Hennepin County, advocacy groups, businesses, and state agencies. Additional details about the engagement options are included in Appendix A.

The feedback was categorized based on alignment with the four plan aims and subsets of the actions and then analyzed to identify key themes and suggestions for improvement. The following feedback summary, along with the verbatim comments (Appendix B), were shared with the county board.

In response to the feedback, staff made clarifying edits directly to the plan. More significant changes were recommended to the Assistant County Administrator of Public Works and the department directors of Environment and Energy and Climate and Resiliency for approval and inclusion in the final plan. See BeHeardHennepin.org/zero-waste-future for a summary of significant changes made to the plan.

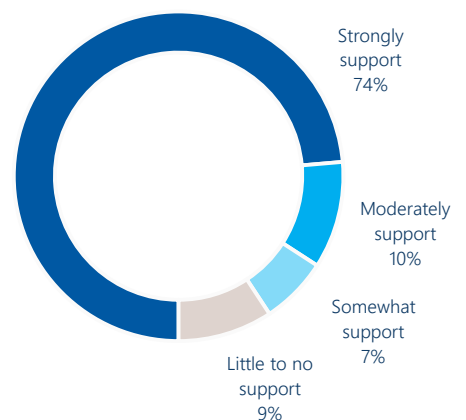
Overall comments

Support for the county's zero-waste goal

The county sought feedback on level of support for the zero-waste goal, which is defined as preventing 90% or more of all discarded materials from being landfilled or incinerated, along with the transformative changes needed in the policies, programs, and resources that make up the solid waste system and significant shifts in who benefits from the system to achieve this goal.

Overwhelmingly, survey respondents widely support the county's zero-waste goal. Some commenters noted it is an ambitious goal, worthy of priority, and a significant challenge to pursue. A few other commenters felt the goal was unrealistic.

Describe your level of support for the county's zero-waste goal



Comments and themes for aim 1: Create a materials management system that reduces racial disparities and advances equity

The first aim of the Zero Waste Plan includes 14 actions recommended to specifically address equity in the future zero-waste system. This aim received mixed support. About 71% of survey respondents said they strongly or moderately support this aim, while 20% said they had little or no support for this aim.

Hennepin Energy Recovery Center (HERC) and its role in the solid waste system

The Zero Waste Plan included actions to reduce reliance on incineration and landfill disposal and create a more equitable system for managing waste. HERC, a county-owned waste-to-energy facility located in downtown Minneapolis that incinerates garbage and recovers energy and metal from trash, is identified by some as a barrier to the formation of a fully equitable zero-waste system. The majority of comments on the plan involved concerns about HERC.

Milestones to phase out HERC

Several environmental advocacy groups promoted the public comment options to encourage members to demand a defined phase-out plan and shutdown date tied to the contract expiration with the operator of HERC in December 2025.

Many commenters expressed that without a shutdown date for HERC, they did not support the plan. Many commenters voiced a strong preference for landfilling over waste-to-energy. Some commenters expressed that HERC was the county's largest impediment to zero waste, and, therefore, phase-out needed to be in the forefront. Other commenters noted that HERC should be phased out because it was incompatible with the state's long-term carbon-free energy goal.

Many commenters suggested that waiting until the county approaches zero waste to phase out HERC is inequitable and continues the racial disparities experienced by environmental justice communities. These commenters relayed concerns about environmental and health impacts from HERC. They discussed elevated rates of asthma and cumulative health impacts in north Minneapolis and said they believe HERC is a key factor in existing health disparities.

HERC is also seen as a symbol of environmental injustices that have not been addressed. One commenter suggested that since HERC's location and potential pollution impacts have made it a deeply dividing issue, prioritizing the phase-out of HERC before the county approaches zero waste could be an important way to gain community trust.

Other commenters expressed support for HERC, voicing concerns about more waste going to landfills and the potential environmental consequences. Some commenters wanted to better understand the economic and operational impacts of phasing out HERC, and some expressed that too much trash is still unrecyclable and true zero waste was unrealistic.

HERC upgrades

Many commenters expressed concern about any additional investment into HERC and suggested those dollars instead be used to advance zero-waste actions. Some commenters expressed interest in what could be done for additional pollution control or how the infrastructure could be used to recover more recyclables.

Provide equitable access to recycling services

The Zero Waste Plan includes actions to provide more convenient and equitable access to recycling, composting, and other materials management services for all county residents. Many commenters expressed support for lowering barriers for participation by making services more convenient, improving services at multifamily properties and businesses, incentivizing participation, and expanding drop-off services.

Recycling services by location

Recycling and organics recycling services need to be easier and more widely available, especially in multifamily settings and businesses. Many commenters expressed a desire to participate in organics recycling, but the services are not available at their apartment building or townhouse. Cities support improving recycling at multifamily properties but sought clarity about how the county will help with space and access constraints found at many multifamily locations. Some commenters described the need to equalize access for renters and homeowners, describing the lack of traditional recycling service available at their buildings. Other commenters emphasized the need for better recycling options at businesses.

More recycling options for items not collected in curbside collection

Many commenters expressed support for expanding drop-off recycling options, especially for electronic waste, hazardous items, plastic film, packaging materials, scrap metal, and batteries. They emphasized that, in order to be successful, zero waste actions need to be easier and less expensive than alternatives. Another commenter pointed out that additional drop-off locations may not address the service needs of those without vehicles to transport the materials. One commenter noted that many residents pay additional subscriptions for private companies like Ridwell and Terracycle to collect recyclables that can't be placed in their carts and encouraged the county to consider these specific kinds of waste and what could be done locally to make this kind of recycling affordable and accessible for everyone.

Cities are seeking additional information about who would be responsible for operating and maintaining expanded drop-offs, what specific materials should be collected this way, and how the county will support or resource this effort.

Costs and financial incentives

The Zero Waste Plan includes actions to encourage participation in materials diversion programs by addressing system costs and barriers. Specific ideas include leveraging and financially supporting local organizations and leaders, harnessing the power of the community, reducing financial barriers, and incentivizing participation.

Costs vs. benefits

Several commenters wanted more information about costs to determine their level of support for the zero-waste actions. Others expressed general concern about additional costs for mandated services and the ability of businesses to compete. A few commenters shared their experience with existing multi-tenant recycling and organics programs, noting significant contamination issues due to improper separation despite proper signage and recurring education. One commenter said this added to housing costs with minimal positive outcome.

Financial incentives

Several commenters questioned the use of financial incentives. They raised concerns about whether this was a wise use of taxpayer resources and questioned why we need to offer financial incentives for people to do the right thing. Another commenter questioned the efficacy, saying financial incentives are a short-term solution. A few commenters supported financial incentives or other actions to reduce financial barriers so that zero-waste practices are easier and less expensive than alternatives for even our most challenged communities.

Low-income rate assistance

Cities expressed support for the general concept of rate assistance, though they were concerned about capacity to identify, verify, provide, or track payments for assistance programs. They suggested the county integrate this into existing support services provided by the county.

Racial equity

Several commenters noted support and appreciation for the prioritization of actions in the Zero Waste Plan to reduce racial disparities and advance equity. Other commenters questioned how racial disparities and equity are relevant to waste

management. Questions were raised about what an “equity panel” was and what purpose it would serve for achieving zero waste.

Green jobs

Several commenters noted support for the action to provide living-wage green jobs. They noted that many of these jobs address an areas workforce need, including entry-level recycling and zero-waste specialists for cities, youth educators, and recycling station monitors.

Track progress and ensure accountability

The Zero Waste Plan includes actions to capitalize on the momentum gained during the zero-waste planning process and build upon best practices identified in the community scan. Many comments sought additional details on costs and defined and measurable outcomes for the actions. In addition, cities expressed support for the action to improve waste and recycling data collection from haulers.

Comments and themes for aim 2: Expand the reach of county waste education, grants, and programs

The second aim of the plan includes 15 actions focused on expanding the county’s current efforts in engagement, technical assistance, grant programs, education, and infrastructure. This set of actions received wide support, with 85% of survey respondents indicating strong or moderate support for this aim, while 8% said they had little or no support for this aim.

Education

Most of the comments on Aim 2 describe support for and the importance of increased education. Many commenters expressed frustration with the public’s level of understanding of basic recycling information and waste reduction concepts. Commenters offered suggestions on areas of focus for this education, including broad advertising campaigns, culturally relevant education materials, and youth education.

A number of commenters stressed the importance of access to service being paired with education to be effective. Other commenters noted that awareness-type of education wasn’t typically effective and encouraged the use of behavior change strategies instead. Additional commenters stressed the need for more peer-to-peer education, Community Recycling Ambassadors, education in schools, and other network-based outreach efforts. Finally, some commenters noted specific types of waste that needed more education, including organics, electronic waste, plastics, and used items.

Increased capacity for processing organics

The plan included actions to address the need for increased capacity for processing organics as the county continues to grow participation in organics collection. Many commenters expressed support to develop large-scale organics infrastructure. A few commenters were concerned about larger organics processing and preferred smaller, community-scale options or backyard composting. One commenter noted contamination and issues with “biodegradable” packaging and encouraged the county to ensure that the compost or other products generated from the organics facilities is a high quality, marketable product. Another commenter expressed their support for the Blue Bag system, which doesn’t require an additional cart or pickup.

Funding for recycling grants and assistance to improve services

The plan includes actions to enhance the county's grant programs to help businesses, schools, and institutions. Many commenters expressed support for grants and assistance for schools, multifamily locations, and businesses. Some commenters were concerned about grants to businesses. Other commenters emphasized the funding should go to help pay staff, such as lunchroom attendants or building managers, to implement effective recycling programs.

Improve compliance with recycling requirements

The plan includes actions to increase resources to improve compliance with the county's current recycling requirements at multifamily properties and commercial businesses. A few commenters noted that improving compliance would be an important step to increase diversion. Cities are especially interested in the county providing more enforcement of ordinances that they also have a responsibility to enforce. One commenter noted a need for requirements for public space and school recycling. A few commenters did not support requirements to recycle.

Comments on aim 3: Adopt policies that accelerate the transition to a zero-waste future

The plan's third aim includes 17 zero-waste policy actions designed to move the county closer to an equitable zero-waste system. About 85% of survey respondents strongly or moderately supported this aim, while 9% expressed little to no support.

Several commenters expressed strong support for this aim overall. They said this is where we are going to see the most impacts, and the strategies will help to fill big gaps in the community's zero-waste infrastructure. They also saw the potential for these strategies to create green jobs. They encouraged the county to act now to start implementing these strategies.

Some commenters said the county is trying to do too much with this aim. They encouraged the county to focus in one or two areas that are the most impactful, realistic, and within the county's control. One commenter said this aim seems to be the most difficult and divisive.

County-level policies to reach zero waste

Mandate participation in recycling and composting programs

The plan includes actions to make recycling and organics recycling participation mandatory for all generators. Several commenters expressed support for mandates generally. Some said they strongly support mandates, while others expressed more reluctant support, saying they understand why mandates may be necessary. One commenter said, "I don't see how we can make progress toward a zero-waste goal without mandated participation."

Several commenters said that, when looking at the experience from other communities, requiring food waste to be recycled is a must. They said cities and the county can help residents by ensuring adequate infrastructure and funding and supporting them with education and resources. Commenters also suggested that businesses, schools, churches, and multifamily housing should be required to have zero-waste ambassadors or a committee that provide training and support for their waste programs.

One commenter said that they would prefer organics recycling pick up service, since they tried drop-off, and it didn't work for them. Other said education should focus on making sure people know what they can compost and understanding and

addressing barriers. Several respondents said there needed to be an exception to these mandates for people who compost at home. One respondent said participants should be given the opportunity to access compost.

Other commenters said they generally do not support mandated participation. Some said mandates simply do not work, send the wrong message to the public, or seem difficult to implement. Those opposed said we should use education, peer pressure, and incentives instead of mandates.

Commenters wanted to know how enforcement would be handled, encouraging an approach that involved education, resources, and guidance rather than penalties. They wanted to see the county provide support for small businesses and lower income and vulnerable communities to ensure they don't bear disproportionate costs of transitioning to a zero-waste system.

Some cities said that mandated participation would be difficult to enforce and would require them to create new inspection positions or greatly expand the role of their existing inspectors. Cities said they need funding to support enforcement along with a monitoring and enforcement plan. Some said they could generally support the concepts of mandates and bans but need more details first. They said we need to consider potential unintended consequences to ensure these policies don't have adverse effects on already marginalized groups, such as those with disabilities, those who are unhoused, and people who are low income. They also said we need to make sure we have the infrastructure in place to ensure these policies can be effective.

A city said there should be an exception for lack of space. They mentioned that current building codes do not have adequate space allocation requirements for recycling and no requirements for space for organics recycling. They suggested the county consider adding an action related to building codes and space requirements.

Some commenters said that in addition to mandates, we should look at creating financial incentives related to the costs for garbage. They said there needs to be stronger financial incentives for producing less garbage or higher fees for having large garbage carts. One respondent said that, at the very least, organics recycling programs need to be opt out rather than opt in.

Adopt a single-use ban and zero-waste packaging requirements for food service

The plan includes an action to develop a county policy to transition to zero-waste food service packaging and eliminate single-use, non-compostable, non-recyclable items. Many commenters supported this action. They said banning single-use plastics is essential, and this ban is a must. They said this is important because it's difficult right now to buy food that is not packaged in plastic. They said businesses need to do their part, but most will not without a mandate.

Several commenters had questions about or ideas for what would be included in this policy. Several commenters supported requirements for all takeout containers to be compostable. Others said they wanted to see the policy go further and encourage waste prevention. They said they wanted to see requirements, not just encouragement, for reusable service ware for dine-in and reusable and returnable containers for takeout.

An advocacy organization said the way this action is worded is confusing because it isn't clear if the ban would be on single-use products or on non-compostable and non-recyclable products. Several respondents said the county needs to ensure the policy creates a system that is actually more sustainable by considering the lifecycle impact of products and ensuring they actually get recycled or composted.

Some commenters wanted more specifics about the timeline for implementing this action, and one respondent wanted to know how the county could work regionally to reduce confusion for consumers. Another commenter wanted to know details about enforcement, saying we need sufficient resources for enforcement to ensure the policy is effective. One city called out the need to address the food code since it currently does not allow reusable containers to be washed off site, impacting the feasibility of reusable to-go containers.

Other commenters had ideas for what sectors should be included. Some wanted to ensure schools would be included and supported in moving away from pre-packaged food and disposable service ware. Others wanted to see acceleration in bulk buying at grocery stores, support for events, and single-use horticulture and landscaping products included.

Several commenters were concerned about this policy's impact on small businesses and wanted to know what the businesses who would be impacted by the ban thought about it. They wondered if the county would provide grants or products for purchase at a reduced rate. They also said businesses need support and tools to ensure customers sort items into the correct waste streams to avoid contamination. Another commenter suggested support for Minnesota innovators and manufacturers to make sustainable packaging solutions locally.

Several commenters thought the ban was unrealistic or were not sure how it would work. They said the behavior shift required for consumers to return reusable takeout containers would probably result in more waste.

Transition to organized collection

Several commenters were thrilled to see the transition to organized collection included in the plan. They recognized the benefits for reducing garbage truck emissions and wear and tear on city streets, thought this would solve a lot of problems immediately, and said this is one area where a government entity can make a huge difference. One commenter said they would support organized collection if it would save households and organizations money.

Cities sought clarification on how an organized collection requirement would be implemented and what support the county would provide. They wondered if the organized hauler requirement would be decided at the county level or what action would be needed at the city council level. They also wondered what support the county would provide for engagement, acknowledging there is likely to be opposition.

Adding multifamily to single-family residential service

The plan includes an action to evaluate requiring cities to add multifamily properties to their residential waste programs. Some cities said they could work with private haulers to provide this service, and the county should use state SCORE funding or provide other funding to support cities in purchasing equipment and implementing and marketing these programs. Other cities wondered what improvements this strategy would achieve and sought clarification on how this would be implemented and what support the county would provide.

Require events to be zero waste

The plan includes an action to work with cities to establish a requirement that all events over a certain size threshold be zero waste. Cities sought clarification on what events would be included in this requirement, including the size of event and public versus private events. They suggested the county include funding for supplies and education for both event organizers and attendees in this strategy.

State laws that advance zero waste and materials circularity

Extended producer responsibility

The plan includes an action for the county to lead the development of a state law for extended producer responsibility for packaging and printed paper. Many commenters said they supported extended producer responsibility, and the county should make advocating for and supporting this legislation among the highest priorities. They said we will see the most progress by putting the responsibility on corporations instead of consumers. They called out that the county needs to work in partnership, as this policy will only be effective when implemented regionally or statewide.

In addition to being responsible for recycling or disposal of products, commenters said the policy should focus on production and prioritize waste reduction, reuse, and eliminating toxic chemicals in packaging. They also said the policy should set specific goals and targets and include enforcement for non-compliance. They specified that the policy should not be written by the manufacturers or the packaging industry.

A local nonprofit recycler encouraged the county to advocate for effective extended producer responsibility policies that, in addition to shifting the cost of waste management from residents and businesses to producers, would also encourage waste reduction, packaging redesign, and greater equity in access to reuse and recycling services. Elements they suggested for the policy include truth in labeling requirements, limiting use of the chasing arrows symbol, creating a statewide recyclability list, and reducing toxic chemicals in recyclable and compostable packaging.

The recycler also encouraged the county to include additional producer responsibility policies in the Zero Waste Plan. This includes a bottle deposit program and reform of the state's existing producer responsibility law for electronics.

A city said that extended producer responsibility policies should include effective and transparent oversight, monitoring, and accountability with limited power given to industry-run producer responsibility organizations. They suggested the use of fees to encourage reduction and redesign that would move the system toward less packaging, less toxic materials, and more products that are reusable, refillable, recyclable, or compostable. They said the policy needed strong definitions for reuse, composting, and recycling to ensure it has the intended consequences and benefits. They also said the policy should build on existing infrastructure and investments that have been made by waste and recycling companies and local and state governments.

Minimum diversion requirement for construction and demolition projects

The plan includes an action for the county to work with state legislators to adopt a mandatory minimum diversion requirement for construction and demolition projects. One city said they supported encouraging contractors to salvage building materials as much as possible but had concerns about a minimum diversion policy. They sought clarity on how the minimum diversion requirement would be enforced. They also said more research was needed into the feasibility of capturing 50% of landfill waste from new construction projects.

Right-to-repair legislation

Several commenters were excited to see right-to-repair legislation included in the plan. An advocacy organization said this should be a low-hanging fruit action since the county already supports right-to-repair legislation through a regional partnership.

Comments and themes for aim 4: Implement programs to advance circularity, reduce waste, and support reuse

The fourth aim in the plan includes 12 actions related to circularity, waste reduction, and reuse. About 87% of survey respondents strongly or moderately supported this aim, while 7% percent expressed little to no support.

Many commenters said the actions under this aim should be a priority. They said reducing waste in the first place and reusing what already exists is essential, and they thought the ideas included here were innovative and fun. Several respondents encouraged the county to start making progress on these actions right away.

One respondent said they liked these actions but wanted to ensure they didn't come at the expense of services for BIPOC, low-income, and other communities facing disparities or put more costs onto those communities. Some respondents said they did not support this aim because they don't think we need more programs or studies, the ideas seem too vague, want to know the details about cost, or think the costs will be too high.

Improve circularity of the built environment and reuse, recover, and divert construction and demolition debris

Several commenters expressed strong support for these actions, saying that behavior and norm changes around building materials, demolition, and remodeling are badly needed. They also said more education is needed, both for building inspectors and so that people know how to have conversations with contractors.

Some commenters thought these policies seemed difficult to implement, and others wanted to be sure they didn't create more barriers, delay timelines, or raise costs. A city wondered what the expected delay in demolition would be from the notification and salvage process and if they could require this and comply with Minnesota Building Code requirements.

Increase reuse, repair, and waste reduction countywide

Brick-and-mortar reuse and repair centers

Several commenters said they loved the idea of establishing brick-and-mortar reuse and repair centers. They saw an opportunity to build repair skills in the community with these centers and support workforce development, green jobs, and economic growth. They suggested siting them in low-income and working-class neighborhoods and making sure they have accessible hours.

Other commenters suggested the county partner with and help market and expand existing efforts, including Buy Nothing groups, tool and toy sharing organizations, libraries, and secondhand stores. Some said they were not sure reuse and repair centers are necessary since a lot of efforts are already happening, while others thought the county could build on and expand these efforts.

Countywide innovation hub

Several commenters wanted clarity on what an innovation hub would be and why it would be necessary, while others said they didn't see a need for this. Some commenters wanted to see the innovation hub focus on serving and supporting currently marginalized people, especially Indigenous people. Another respondent suggested the county partner with existing circularity efforts.

Support development of regional end markets

Local and regional end markets for recyclable commodities

Many commenters supported efforts to develop end markets, recognizing this is the only way that recycling is successful. Several commenters emphasized that county investments should be focused on small-scale, local operations as this will be the best way to provide economic and social benefits and address disparities. Other commenters saw an opportunity to invest in end markets for new, different, and currently hard-to-recycle materials, including clothing, batteries, and solar panels.

City and county specifications and policies to increase demand for finished compost

One city sought clarity on what a local government buyback requirement would entail. Another city said they are creating an ordinance to require the use of soil amendment for sod installation and landscape projects, and they thought the county could create a platform for local governments to share what they have done to make it easier for others to comply.

Feasibility study for recovering recyclable materials from the trash

Commenters had mixed feelings about conducting a feasibility study. Some were intrigued by this idea. They were unsure if it would work but were interested to know the possibility of recovering materials, such as heavy metals and furniture/bulky items. Others didn't think the investment would be worth it since the value of anything recovered would be degraded. Other commenters were skeptical about the value of a study, saying they were not sure what it would accomplish and favoring action over studies.

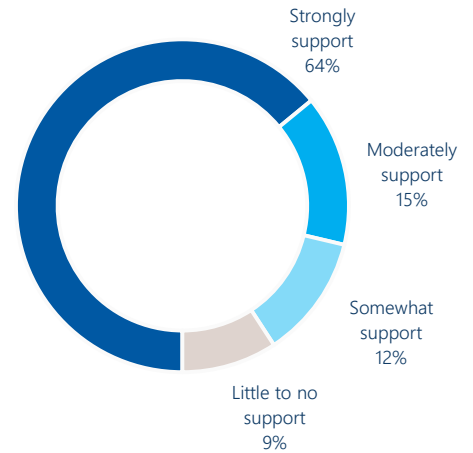
Overall support for the actions in the plan

After reviewing on the aims, the county sought feedback on overall support for the actions in the Zero Waste Plan.

About 80% of survey respondents strongly or moderately support the actions. Many commenters expressed their appreciation for the county pursuing the plan, the detail and range of the actions included and for the planning and engagement effort.

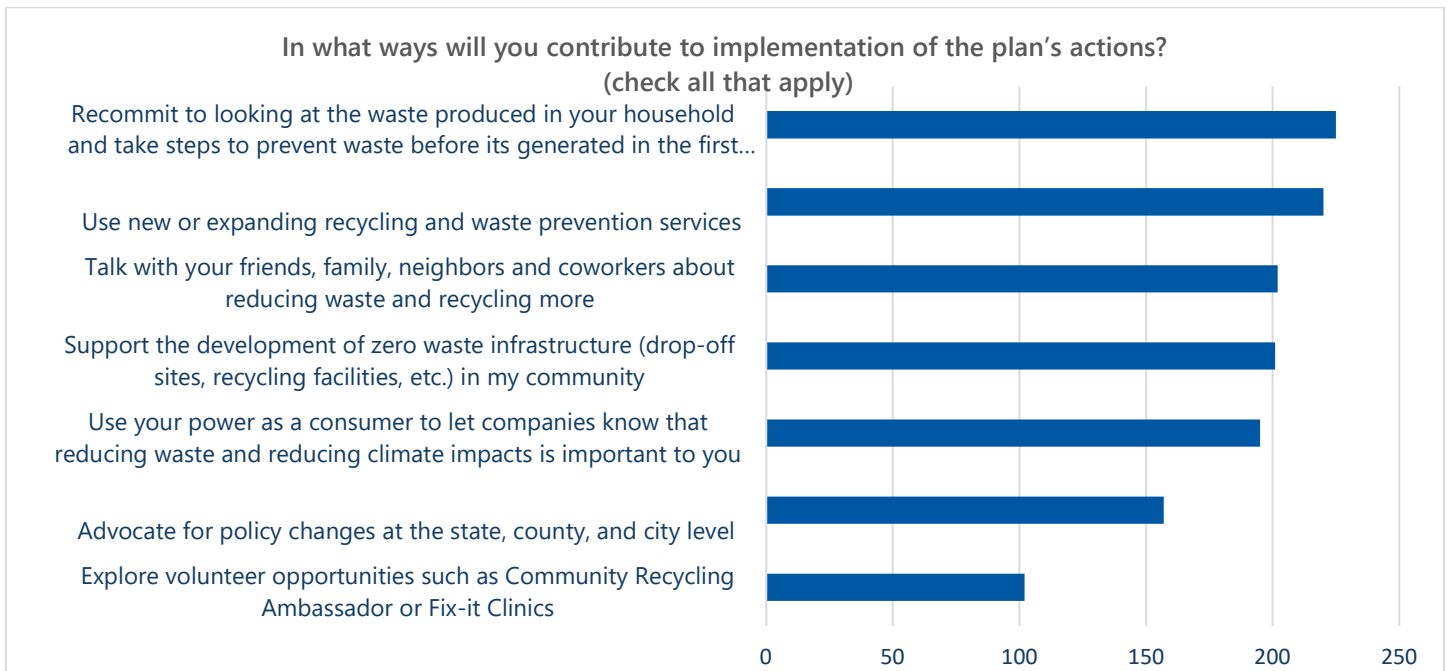
About 9% of commenters expressed little to no support for the overall actions in the plan. Many of the comments reiterated concerns about HERC and the desire for the plan to include a shut down date. Others expressed the plan was overreaching, too costly, or unrealistic.

Describe your level of support for the actions in the Zero Waste Plan



Individual contributions to implementing the Zero Waste Plan actions

Survey respondents were given a series of actions to consider and asked in what ways they would contribute to implementation of the plan’s actions. About two-thirds of respondents said they would recommit to looking at the waste they produce in their household and take steps to prevent waste. Respondents were also interested in using new or expanded services resulting from the plan implementation. More than half would support the development of zero waste infrastructure like drop-off sites or recycling facilities in their community. Just under half of respondents would advocate for policy changes at the state, county, and city level. About one-third expressed interest in volunteer opportunities.



Appendix A:

Public comment options and participant information

Feedback on the draft Zero Waste Plan was gathered from February 21 to March 20, 2023.

Anyone interested in the Zero Waste Plan was encouraged to provide comments by completing a survey, attending an online community meeting or submitting written comments via email.

Online survey

A total of 333 surveys were completed. 90% were residents of Hennepin County. About one-third of participants work for a business, industry, or institution in Hennepin County. About one-quarter work with, volunteer with, or are a member of an environmental advocacy organization or city environmental commission. About 5% of participants were trained Community Recycling Ambassadors, and another 5% work for a local government or state agency on waste or sustainability issues.

Approximately 75% of respondents provided demographic information. These survey respondents represented a good spread of age groups. About 66% identify as female, 30% as male, and 4% as nonbinary/third gender. Respondents were predominantly white (about 93%), and 6% were American Indian, 3% Asian, 2% Black, and about 3% Hispanic or Latino.

About 60% of the responses were from Minneapolis residents, and 32% were from residents of 24 other Hennepin County cities: Bloomington, Brooklyn Center, Brooklyn Park, Corcoran, Deephaven, Eden Prairie, Edina, Golden Valley, Greenfield, Hanover, Hopkins, Independence, Long Lake, Maple Grove, Maple Plain, Medina, Minnetonka, Mound, New Hope, Plymouth, Richfield, Robbinsdale, St. Louis Park, and Wayzata.

Online community meeting

A total of 69 participants attended an online community meeting where county staff presented the process to develop the plan and reviewed the four aims and core actions of the plan. Participants made comments and asked questions of the staff and the consultant that developed the plan. A recording of the meeting was also made available for those who couldn't attend the meeting live. Demographic information was not collected.

Written comments via email

The county received 119 letters and emails. Letters were submitted by the cities of Eden Prairie, Minneapolis, and Minnetonka and the organizations of Eureka Recycling, Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, MN Environmental Justice Table, and Reuse Minnesota. Messages were also received from individuals, including a group of medical providers in north Minneapolis and a Sierra Club Action Alert that resulted in 111 emails and/or letters.