



# CAMBRIDGE

# CITY COUNCIL

Patricia Nolan  
*City Councillor*

**To:** The Cambridge City Council  
**Date:** June 17, 2026  
**Subject:** Zero Waste Master Plan 2.0 Ordinance Updates

To the Honorable Mayor, the City Council:

As Chair of the Health and Environment Committee, I would like to provide a summary of public engagement as well as ordinance changes under discussion for the Zero Waste Master Plan Update (ZWMP 2.0), as well as important information about timing and exemptions. These ordinance changes are the result of a more than 2-year process to update our first Zero Waste Master Plan and the language below was approved unanimously in June 2025 when the City Council adopted the ZWMP 2.0. I hope we can pass these ordinance changes to a second reading on Monday evening and finalize at our Summer meeting.

Sincerely,  
Councillor Patty Nolan

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## **Citywide Impact** (top line summary)

- ***Saves Money***: Trash is expensive for the City to collect and haul. Recycling and food waste is significantly less expensive. Reducing solid waste costs for the City will save taxpayer dollars now and more in the future, as costs are expected to rise further. .
- ***Controls Rodent Issues***: Food waste diversion and waste management planning are the best rodent reduction strategies. By mandating food waste diversion and mandating Zero Waste Plans for large properties, we can significantly reduce food resources for rodents.
- ***Encourages Waste Reduction***: Average household trash is 23 gallons – so allowing 45 is double the average. Plus, if households put all eligible items in recycling and food waste bins, the trash will be cut in HALF. That is because audits show that half of trash is recyclables or food waste.

## **Outreach and Public Engagement**

- The ZWMP 2.0 came out of a multi-year public process that included several Health and Environment Committee meetings, dozens of public meetings, events, and community outreach initiatives over several years that resulted in several rounds of input and changes.
- Previous council meetings about ZWMP 2.0:

- 10/25/23 - H&Env – process for ZWMP 2.0 update
- 10/22/24 - H&Env – early findings from process
- 3/25/25 - H&Env – draft ZWMP 2.0 presented
- 6/9/25 - Full Council voted to adopt ZWMP 2.0 (CMA 2025 #144)
- 5/26/26 - H&Env explaining each of the ordinance changes
- Specific Outreach
  - ZWMP webpage has a 26-page document that outlines the stakeholder engagement process.
  - DPW reached out to each of the business associations (Chamber, Central Sq BID, HSBA, KSA, and ECBA) in 2024 to go over all of the proposed changes in the ZWMP 2.0.
  - DPW has also done informal outreach to businesses to ask about food waste, “Skip the Stuff”
  - DPW also had discussions with several large property owners and managers about the changes including: Harvard, MITMCO, Boston Properties, DivcoWest, and others.
  - DPW has worked with small business owners who have already successfully implemented these ordinance changes as part of a pilot program - a selection of testimonials from business owners are provided at the end of this document.
  - H&Env chair separately reached out to all business associations in early 2025 with invites to the H&Env meeting and all draft ZWMP 2.0 materials.

### Specific Ordinance Changes

- Bring Your Own Bag (BYOB) Ordinance – *updated*
  - In line with California changes and other jurisdictions after study of impact of previous BYOB laws which found that reusable plastic bags were not being reused effectively
  - Bans “thin plastic bags” and requires a \$.10 fee for each bag used. “Thicker plastic bags” can only be purchased before the register (rather than automatically after the register). Paper bags or compostable bags can still be acquired after the register.
- Skip The Stuff Ordinance – *new*
  - Customers must “opt-in” (specifically request) to get plastic cutlery or other single-use items (or have them at a self-service counter) instead of automatically including them with every order. Similar ordinances exist in NYC, Chicago, Denver, and others. Customers appreciate this step - since most do not want the additional items.
  - Case study found that restaurants are able to save money and reduce trash by only including requested items. Many Cambridge businesses have this function in their standard operating procedures for in-house dining. And, many businesses have an “opt-in” button on their online ordering page. So these two examples meet the Ordinance requirements already.
- Refuse and Litter Ordinance – *updated*
  - **Required separation of food waste, textiles, and mattresses** in all residential and commercial buildings (textiles and mattresses have been state law since 2022; MA proposed to require food waste diversion at all commercial establishments by 2028 and residential buildings by 2030).

- One of the primary drivers of food waste ban is for rodent control. Each Food Waste cart has a lock/latch. By locking in food waste, it cuts off the food source for rodents. Dozens of restaurants, 50+ unit buildings, and small residential homes have praised the rodent control benefit of the City's food waste program. Locations that don't participate in the food waste program have higher rates of rodent issues. For example, one property management company that DPW and ISD has worked with has continued to see high rodent activity because the property manager won't participate in the program. As a result, despite spending thousands of dollars on extermination and replacement trash carts, the rodent issue persists.
- **All trash, recycling, and food waste must be in city issued bins**
  - Exception: one overflow trash bag is allowed per household per week (but overflow bag can only be set out after 5am on collection day to reduce rodent access – bin setout time is not changing).
- **Volume of trash** (not including recycling and food waste) per household per week is decreasing from 150 gallons to 45 gallons per week. The Ordinance change is a reflection of DPW's current policy. The goal of this change is to put into Ordinance the current practices of DPW.
  - During rollout of standard issue bins, each household was given 45 gallons worth of bins.
  - On average, Cambridge households currently generate approximately 23 gallons of trash per week.
  - Simply diverting food waste and recycling, most households will be able to cut their trash output in half according to trash audits by DPW.
- **Zero Waste Plans** required from owners of all large buildings (>25k sqft and 13+ units).
  - Plans must include: communication strategy to tenants; contact information for the waste management team; information on volume of trash, recycling, and food waste; and name of waste hauler (if not the City).
  - The goal of this change is to help DPW to better administer the programs and for residents to have more clear information on how to dispose of waste during move-out rather than putting it on the sidewalk anytime.

### **Timing/Exemptions**

- According to the ZWMP 2.0 document, DPW staff will be working to implement these ordinances over time and ***will primarily focus on education for the first year.***
- All ordinance changes ***will not go into effect until 6 months after passage*** to give time for businesses and residents to adjust.
- ***All ordinance changes include exemption language: the Commissioner may exempt businesses from the requirements for up to an additional year if specific requirements would cause undue hardship.***

### **Small Business Testimonials**

- *Having the option to compost is huge for us. The city of Cambridge makes it easy for us as a small business. The pickups are the same day as our recycling pick up, and since*

*we're in a residential building we share the containers with the other tenants who are happy to have the option of having their food waste go to something better than a trash pile!*

- Stan Hilbert, Forage Cambridge
  
- *In the beginning, we did face some difficulties with the training and setup process with the food waste program. However, in the long run, we found that the food waste pickup program has been very beneficial for the restaurant, the condo building, the city, and the environment. We also noticed improvements with pest-related issues outside the building after the program was put in place. We would be happy to support this program and help contribute to a better environment and a greener city.*
  - Adam Bing, Dumpling House, Cambridge
  
- *My business has been participating in the Food Waste Program for approximately 2 years and I want to say that it has been a great asset for my business and the environment as well. The following are benefits my business has realized since joining the program.*
  - *Reduced waste disposal costs paid to third party waste services company.*
  - *Reduced payroll as staff require less time to process food waste and transfer to the green totes provided.*
  - *Increase in available space in the business as the green totes take up less space than the boxes previously used for food waste.*
  - *The overall ease of participating in the program.*
  - *Peace of mind knowing that food waste is being reduced in landfills.*
  - Carl Fantasia, New Deal Fish Market, Cambridge
  
- *We are very happy with the Cambridge Commercial Composting program. We have been utilizing the program for several years now and they make it easy to be green. The program helps us reduce waste—we now have about 1/3 the amount of trash we would have if we didn't compost. The programs save us money on Trash pick-up or Private Compost Pick up. The program allows us to promote how we are a sustainable business by reducing waste and helping the environment. The program provides very good bins that are sealed tightly so no pests get in or are attracted to the area. The customer service and pick up service has been excellent. They are consistent with the schedule and pick up times, there is no mess left behind and the staff are very responsive via email if we have any questions.*
  - Valerie Shulock, Basil Tree Catering, Cambridge
  
- *Twenty years ago, the trash conditions behind our building were a rodent's dream — and enough of a nightmare for property management that the restaurants were no longer allowed access to the dumpsters. That change could have been a crisis, but instead it catalyzed our transition to composting at exactly the right moment... It wasn't hard to get buy-in from staff, because the benefits were immediate and ongoing. Before composting, our trash was messy, heavy, and chaotic, often resulting in ripped bags, leaks, and drips. After composting, food waste was separated into sturdier containers and smaller batches, making it cleaner and easier to carry. Before composting, the dumpsters were festering piles that understandably made staff interact with them sloppily — often just hurling a bag in and hoping it landed fully inside. They were almost always overflowing, with food waste accumulating around and underneath them. After composting, each type of waste*

*had its own tote, and those totes could be kept inside the restaurant utility room, which encouraged everyone on staff to keep them clean, organized, and intact. Before composting, all waste was treated as trash: out of sight, out of mind. After composting, everything discarded had a place and a purpose, which led to better practices, better containment, and a much cleaner operation overall. Now, it is even easier to get our staff to adopt and maintain the practice... What used to be a revolting chore is now a daily project our staff is engaged in — one that keeps our restaurant cleaner, improves working conditions, and makes a real difference for the environment. I am grateful that Cambridge had the foresight to create this program, and I hope the City continues to recognize restaurant composting as one of those rare public programs that works on every level: for businesses, for workers, for public health, and for the climate.*

- Kari Kuelzer, Grendel's Den Restaurant and Bar