



**NYC-EJA Testimony in Support of Big Reuse, the Lower East Side Ecology Center, and
Local-Scale Composting in NYC**

Joint Oversight Hearing, Committees on Parks and Recreation and Sanitation,
December 18, 2020

Thank you to the Committee Chairs and members, and all who have been testifying and organizing in support of just organics processing in New York City this year.

My name is Dr. Tok Oyewole, and I am testifying on behalf of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance (NYC-EJA), a non-profit citywide membership network linking grassroots organizations from low-income neighborhoods and communities of color in their fight for environmental justice, founded in 1991.

For decades, NYC-EJA has led efforts for comprehensive policy reforms to address the disproportionate burden of New York's solid waste system on a handful of environmental justice communities. Today, we are testifying as co-organizers of the Save Our Compost coalition in support of preserving the sites of Big Reuse and the Lower East Side Ecology Center, where these organizations have been successfully processing food scraps, yard waste, and wood chips for decades.

These sites are the backbone of the NYC Department of Sanitation's food scrap recycling program, which was partially restored to the amount of \$2.88 million amidst the threat of total budget cuts, in a fight that thousands across the City pushed for in 2020.

Local-scale diversion of organic materials is important for many reasons, including the fact that the impacts of our solid waste system are already greatest in a few low-income and communities of color in New York City where truck-dependent transfer stations are clustered, causing higher rates of health consequences such as asthma, heart disease, COPD, and various cancers. Closing these sites would worsen these disparities within the City, and outside of it; it would result in higher emissions of air pollutants that exacerbate impacts of COVID-19, and higher greenhouse gas emissions from transportation, incineration, and landfilling.

Thousands across the City fought to achieve a concessionary budget win this year, but this small win will be wasted if the administration and NYC Parks - who manages 14% of our City's land - do not provide the space to compost these materials. Closing these sites when city composting is already near its capacity is moving us backwards, and it simply does not make sense for a City to do this while the de Blasio



administration professes commitment to pursuing waste equity, zero waste, and climate justice goals. This year, the administration has eliminated a school organics collection program, a pilot residential curbside collection program, and has lagged behind cities like Seattle in implementing universal organics collection; the administration has not provided sufficient space, supported green jobs, or built the infrastructure required to support composting; and the administration has allowed for polluting, heavy-duty diesel trucks to needlessly cart materials tens of thousands of miles each day. Some of the cuts to organics diversion initiatives this year have been described as austerity measures related to COVID, but these failures were apparent before the pandemic and are a result of the administration consistently choosing not to commit funding and support for these vital programs. So today, we are asking for more than just talk about the City’s climate, waste, and justice goals - we need to see action. The public and these organizations have stated loudly and clearly that these lands should be maintained for the composting sites, and Parks evicting them because of various “needs for this space,” in particular, is an unacceptable abuse of decision-making power. And ultimately, this fight for these two sites, while critical as evinced by the waves of support online and at our press conference earlier this week, is a distraction from broader waste equity goals the City is far from accomplishing.

Today the City can win with an easy fix:

The LES Ecology Center site should be preserved, incorporated into the East Side Coastal Resiliency Project, and moved to temporary space in the interim.

Big Reuse should be allowed to continue composting at their current site under the Queensboro bridge, and should have their license renewed.

This morning, we learned about a possible 6-month license extension for Big Reuse’s Queensboro Bridge site, which is not long enough. If Big Reuse is to be forced out of a site where they have community support and existing infrastructure to complete their work, the license extension should at least last until the City has worked with them and found another site, but the preference is that they are allowed to stay.

Certain adverse outcomes can be avoided by supporting these organizations, allowing them to continue to serve as a model for community composting, green jobs, and environmental education, and offering them permanent homes. This is the exact type of climate solution we should be supporting, and the idea that the City would be closing these sites is frankly ridiculous.

Thank you for your time and consideration.