

Lede (by Bri):

AUSTIN, Texas – In a city that prides itself on its vibrant food scene, a new report from the city showed that millions of pounds of edible food are thrown away each year. But, with a series of innovative programs and initiatives, organizations within Austin have committed to eliminating food waste and redirecting excess food to those in need.

Nut graf (by Bri):

Food waste, paired with food loss, is defined by the United States Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service as “reductions in edible food mass anywhere along the food chain.” According to the department, food waste also sometimes refers to the loss of inedible food matter, such as eggshells or banana peels.

A 2019 report from ReFED, a nonprofit dedicated to ending food waste through data-driven solutions, determined that the United States wastes 54.2 million tons of food every year.

Every day in Austin, 1.24 million pounds of food are discarded and end up in landfills, according to the 2022 State of the Food System report. Despite the abundance of food available in Austin, the city's levels of food waste have prompted local organizations to take action.

From community composting programs to food recovery initiatives, there are a variety of solutions being implemented to address the issue. These efforts strive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, alleviate food insecurity and create more sustainable, resilient communities.

Marena’s section - Too Good to Go:

Barista Sahara Bond sifts through the day's leftovers, collecting sandwiches and pastries from the glass display refrigerator. Her task is briefly interrupted by a coffee refill for a customer, which she promptly tends to before returning to the food collection. The leftovers will be available for customers arriving near closing time.

"I don't like to throw away any food," Bond said.

The customers will be arriving shortly to pick up the food they ordered using the Too Good To Go app.

Too Good To Go is a mobile application that offers discounted surprise bags from restaurants and grocery stores in an effort to reduce food waste.

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Launched in Copenhagen in 2016, the app saves more than 100,000 meals each day from being thrown away and is currently available in 17 countries. Austin is the 10th U.S. city to host the app.

The concept is simple: Restaurants list their surplus food on the app for a discounted price, allowing customers to purchase it at a fraction of the original cost. This not only prevents the food from going to waste but also provides restaurants with a way to make a profit on the food they did not sell by the end of the day.

The app, according to the Too Good To Go website, "helps everyday people fight food waste in their local communities."

Bond's efforts to prevent food waste align with Austin's goal of achieving zero waste by 2040.

Coffee People, where she works, is certified gold by the city for this achievement, demonstrating its commitment to sustainability and community impact.

"I've worked at different places like Starbucks, where they're just, like, throw away everything, but it's the first place I've worked at where we really care," Bond said.

Diminishing food waste is a team effort at Coffee People. "I love that we all feel passionately about the environment," Bond said.

By using the Too Good To Go app, consumers can play a small but significant role in reducing this waste.

"I'd rather somebody eat it than nobody eat it, you know?" said Bond.

Eduardo's section - ATX Free Fridge:

One way Austin residents are working to reduce food waste is through mutual aid groups. Mutual aid is a form of community solidarity in which people care for one another, operating outside of the system that created the problem. One group, the ATX Free Fridge Project, seeks to reduce food waste and insecurity through a series of community fridges that are free for anyone to drop off or pick up food.

"Mutual aid groups are a great way to build these support pipelines from people who have something to give, such as restaurants and food trucks that have more than they can serve, to the people who need it," said ATX Free Fridge volunteer Van Anderson.

Anderson has volunteered weekly for the Free Fridge Project, working with the group to cook meals and drop off food in fridges across the city. Anderson has also participated in food rescues,

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events in which volunteers work with restaurants and food distribution centers to distribute any unused or overstocked foods to community members. These events ensure that leftover food doesn't spoil or get wasted. Any leftovers, Anderson said, are directly restocked in the community fridges.

"I've seen those fridges loaded with as much food as could fit in them, and it's completely gone in less than 24 hours," Anderson said. "So this tells me that not only is there a high demand, but it's also a really effective model for responding to that demand."

For more solutions, Anderson points to recent food freedom laws that have been passed in other states, such as Maine and Wyoming. Food freedom laws eliminate certain restrictions on the production of homemade goods and allow small businesses to sell directly to consumers with no license required. This, Anderson said, puts more power in the hands of the community to regulate how food is distributed, thus promoting organizations such as the Free Fridge Project and preventing more widespread waste.

Still, Anderson said the most effective way to reduce food waste is through mutual aid and community outreach.

"People have a right to food. It's this inherent, natural and unalienable right," he said. "We need to look to that model for the rest of the nation because it does a lot of good in ensuring food can be distributed to the people that need it."

Rylan's Section - UT Zero Waste Program:

The University of Texas at Austin has also taken the initiative to combat food waste. The Zero Waste Program was started in response to UT setting a zero waste goal in the year 2020. To achieve that goal, the university needs to divert 90% of food from going to landfills.

Lindsey Hutchinson, the senior zero waste coordinator, said that events around campus can cause so much food to be wasted. The program has helped give advice for campus organization events, major athletic events around campus, and sorority and fraternity events. The program also helps event planners by providing assistance in waste disposal. Planning before the event is the biggest and most important challenge for event planners, Hutchinson said.

"We often find that people do not have a plan for leftover food after they host an event," Hutchinson said. "We offer free consultations to help people have a plan for what to do with any extra food."

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In addition, people around campus can help mitigate food waste in their everyday lives. Hutchinson also provides information to individuals about how to avoid food waste even before they go to the grocery store.

"Another tip is to understand what you do and don't have already before you go to the grocery store," Hutchinson said. "This can help mitigate 'double purchasing,' which has been a big problem that I have seen around campus."

Elle's Section - Austin's Zero Waste Plan:

Evan Beek, an environmental science major, said she often finds herself thinking about all the extra food in the world and wonders if it's going to waste or being passed down and used for good. In one of her classes, they looked at a map of a few big cities and tried to determine why certain areas had higher levels of food waste.

"The big thing that people need to look at is if food is truly being wasted or if it is being used in another way," Beek said. "Even if the food is being composted or sent to a farm to feed animals, it's truly not being wasted — it's just being used in another way. It doesn't always have to be given to other people because sometimes it may not be safe to consume that food."

The city of Austin's Zero Waste Plan is something that Beek thinks could actually help if a mass number of people pay attention and commit to it. The plan was drawn up in 2008 to try to make a zero-waste economy.

The Zero Waste Plan has several objectives, including expanding and improving local and regional recycling and composting programs, introducing new rules and incentives to encourage people to work towards zero waste, and creating resource recovery parks and green campuses for zero-waste buildings and structures. The plan also tackles the need to address the issue of product and packaging waste and calls for retailers and producers to take responsibility for their actions. To promote sustainability, it advocates for a ban on environmentally harmful products.

However, the success of the plan ultimately depends on community involvement. To achieve this, the Zero Waste Plan emphasizes the importance of educating the community and promoting a zero-waste agenda through various legislative actions. It also seeks to establish collaborations and partnerships with numerous entities to ensure that everyone plays their part in achieving a zero-waste society.

Beek also said that reducing food waste involves considering a variety of elements, including the basic concepts of reduce, reuse and recycle, as well as the less well-known principles of refuse and rot. It is important to think about not only how you transport and store your groceries but

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also how they might impact the environment and human health. Additionally, considering how items can be reused is crucial when trying to minimize food waste.

"People need to think of the big picture, not just making sure they don't waste the food they eat," Beek said. "The materials the food comes in can often be recycled as well, and even what we use to consume our food."

If most people don't commit to trying to live a zero-waste lifestyle on their own, the numbers as a whole won't go up, Beek said. Most food waste occurs in houses, whether it is leftovers or food that just goes bad. What if people composted it? Or gave the leftovers away?

"There are many different ways to diminish waste," Beek said. "People just need to actively care and participate in them, as well as be taught about them, because most people don't even know."

Bri's Section – Keep Austin Fed:

Lisa Barden, the executive director of Keep Austin Fed, said that one solution to reduce the amount of food is to take a local approach to food production. Keep Austin Fed is a nonprofit organization focused on redistributing surplus food. A significant challenge to reducing food waste, she said, is that the vast majority of food in Austin is not grown in the city. Currently, only 0.06% of the food consumed in Austin is produced locally, according to the 2022 State of the Food System report.

"If we can encourage more production here in Austin, then that will help reduce food waste because we're not going to be bringing eighteen-wheeler trucks of stuff in here from California — we're going to our local farmer," she said. "But, we need to provide land to do that. We need to provide farmers a working income, a livable income."

According to the 2022 State of the Food System report, Austin farmers lose access to 16.8 acres of farmable land every day — a nearly 81% increase in loss from 2018.

While Barden works with many corporations to reduce food waste, she said that individual consumers are the primary cause of food waste. However, she said that people can take simple steps, such as planning better, eating leftovers and composting unused food, to create substantial change.

"If we start making changes now, we will see the impact of those changes within the next 10 to 20 years, whereas other changes, we may not see the impact of those changes in our lifetime," she said. "But this one, we may actually see the changes, if we can actually make a significant dent in the amount of food that's going to waste."