



Food Scrap Recycling at Multi-Family Properties

Case Study: The Blairs



Background

The Blairs is a 27-acre mixed-use property including 1,400 apartments in four high-rise buildings and townhome style living options (Blair East, Blair Plaza, Blair House, Blair Towns, and The Pearl) located in downtown Silver Spring, Maryland. In 2012, the

community was America's first multi-family residential campus to receive LEED Gold Certification for Operations and Maintenance. The Blairs offers residents a smarter and greener way of living including car-free options,

apartments with Energy Star® appliances and lighting, 100 percent wind power-supplied electricity, and food scrap recycling.

The Tower Companies is a developer, owner, and manager of over 5 million square feet of commercial,

multifamily, and retail properties in the Washington, D.C. Metro area, which includes The Blairs. What makes The Tower Companies unique is its interest in the life cycle of its buildings from development, to construction, and through operations.



Jonathan Bauer, sustainability analyst at The Tower Companies, said their decision to start a food scrap recycling program at The Blairs came from top management. In 2012, The Tower Companies launched a small pilot program for food scrap recycling in Blair East and Blair Plaza. Based on this success, the program was expanded and rolled out to the entire Blairs residential community in 2013. The same program was implemented at The Pearl when it opened in 2017.



Process

After researching and getting competitive bids from several food scrap collection service providers, The Blairs chose to contract with Compost Crew. Compost Crew is a Montgomery County licensed collector that has worked with The Blairs from its initial pilot program in 2012 to the current food scrap recycling integration throughout the entire Blairs community.

Each floor of The Pearl has a trash room where residents can recycle food scraps, mixed paper, and commingled materials in clearly labeled containers.



The Pearl has central food scrap, mixed paper, and commingled material collection containers



Larger central food scrap recycling collection containers in the loading dock

The Blairs property management and cleaning team work together to monitor the food scrap recycling program. The cleaning team is responsible for collecting food scraps every day and bringing them to larger central collection containers in the loading dock. These containers are collected by the Compost Crew, transported to a local composting facility, and processed into a beneficial soil amendment.



As part of The Blairs' sustainability initiative, The Pearl building has an urban farm on-site. Materials from the farm are composted and reused on-site.

Education

Tower's sustainability team organizes trainings for existing and new staff to educate them about the food scrap recycling program. These educational trainings typically include the compost hauler, cleaning crew, and representatives from Montgomery County. Tower also conducts broader sustainability trainings for all staff once or twice a year. This prepares staff, especially leasing agents and property management, for any questions residents may have on the food scrap recycling program.

When new residents move in, The Blairs provides them with a two-gallon food scrap recycling collection container, compostable liners for the container, and guidelines on which materials they can and cannot recycle. In addition to emails and posters placed throughout each property, The Blairs gets residents involved in the food scrap recycling program by organizing special events on Earth Day and America Recycles Day.

From presentations with staff from the Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Solid Waste Services to photo competitions and happy hours, The Blairs takes these opportunities to further educate residents on the food scrap recycling program and its progress.

In-unit food scrap and recycling containers



Results

Even though residents are not required to participate in their food scrap recycling program at The Pearl, it is estimated that up to 80 percent of the residents participate in the program. In 2017, The Blairs (not including The Pearl) recycled 11,610 pounds of food scraps. In its first full year of food scrap recycling, The Pearl is on track to recycle over 6,000 pounds of food scraps, which will account for almost 40 percent of food scrap recycling at the entire Blairs community. Over the past 5 years, The Blairs has diverted over 60,000 pounds of compostable items.

Benefits

A major benefit of The Blairs food scrap recycling program is the observed reduction in trash generation by residents. The increased amount of recycling brings The Tower Companies and The Blairs closer to their shared goal with the County to reduce waste and recycle 70 percent of its waste generated by 2020.

Opportunities & Lessons Learned

With constant turnover in residents, common in multi-family communities, and daily distractions and challenges with which residents contend, The Blairs found the educational component of its food scrap recycling program to be a challenge. In addition to its standard methods of education, The Blairs redesigned signage in trash rooms to clearly distinguish which materials can and cannot be recycled. It also sends quarterly reminders to staff and residents emphasizing participation in the food scrap recycling program as well as updates.

Space is another major limitation for The Blairs' food scrap recycling program. With newer buildings such as The Pearl, the appropriate amount of space for food scrap recycling collection containers in trash rooms and in the loading dock were anticipated and incorporated into the building design. In older buildings, however, The Blairs found it difficult to add another container in an already crowded trash room.

On this front, The Blairs scheduled daily trips to the loading dock to minimize overflowing waste and recycling containers in trash rooms.



Examples of recycling and trash containers in trash rooms at The Pearl

Next Steps

With hundreds of residents in each of The Blairs apartment buildings and an increasing number of leases, The Blairs produces a lot of food scraps. The Pearl, for example, initially plans to add four to five, 35-gallon food scrap collection containers to their loading dock to meet resident's needs.

The next steps for The Blairs are to continue staff and resident education to improve the program, update signage and bins as necessary, continue engagement with the cleaning team, and schedule waste audits to measure progress and find additional areas for improvement.

Recommendations

For multi-family properties considering a food scrap recycling program, The Blairs suggests starting small – whether that is in a small apartment building or a single office. Your office is a particularly smart starting point as it allows you and your office staff to become familiar with materials that can be recycled and the process involved. Then, when you introduce the program to your residents, staff is more familiar with your program and can answer their questions.

Recycling containers in the leasing office of The Pearl



For more information visit
www.montgomerycountymd.gov/recycling or call 3-1-1 or 240-777-0311



**Montgomery County, Maryland • Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Solid Waste Services • Waste Reduction and Recycling Section**

This information is available in an alternative format by calling 240-777-6446.