

VASHON-MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER

SOUND PUBLISHING, INC.

VOL. 61, NO. 53

VASHONBEACHCOMBER.COM

\$1.50

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21, 2023

King County sets aside \$5 million funding for organic processing on Vashon

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The King County Council has authorized spending \$5 million to build an organic processing facility on Vashon and expand the composting area of the island's recycling center, fertilizing efforts to reduce waste on the island.

The facility project, which will be managed by King County Solid Waste Division, will build an organics processing facility to be operated by a third party. When finished, the facility will

give islanders a dedicated place to take organic waste, like food scraps and yard debris.

"We're just super excited," said Nancy O'Connor, President of Zero Waste Vashon, an all-volunteer non-profit that has spearheaded the effort to expand composting on Vashon.

"Organic waste is something like 30 to 40% of the waste on the island," O'Connor said. "And it's something that can be processed locally and turned into a product that has value to island residents."

Funding for the projects is

split into \$3 million and change for the new organics facility and a little over \$2 million to improve collection of organic materials at the island's transfer station. The projects are planned to be funded by bonds, said King County Solid Waste spokesperson Joseph Basile, who added that the county is also looking into grant opportunities for the new organics facility.

Most likely, the new project will lead to a composting facility, Basile said, though there are alternatives to be considered, such as an anaerobic digestion

design, which breaks down organic matter without using oxygen and in a closed system.

The preferred location for the new facility will be at the closed landfill site (the big mound) adjacent to the transfer station, O'Connor said, though that's not set in stone either.

Plenty of work remains. The project will need to jump through permitting and site analysis, and secure a third party to operate the facility.

"But up to this point, it had

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Compost

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not been a budget item — it had just been, really, discussions," O'Connor said. "To get it actually in the budget makes it a real project that the county is committed to seeing happen."

Composting is the human-organized method of efficiently decomposing organic material, a natural, cyclical process that happens to life forms

as they die, rot, and break down into material that provides nutrition for the next generation of life.

Compost, the end result of the composting process, can improve soil health, reduce runoff and be used as fertilizer to help plants grow. Composting also reduces methane emissions by keeping rotting organic waste out of landfills.

Producing the compost locally also reduces the climate change contributing greenhouse gas emissions normally associated

with transporting it on or off the island.

That's a big deal, O'Connor said, because currently, compost collected at the Vashon transfer station is hauled off-island to Cedar Grove in Maple Valley. After being processed there, some of it shipped back in plastic bags to be sold on the island, requiring a 67-mile roundtrip.

"To have it converted locally into compost is a real greenhouse gas saver," O'Connor said. "And we have so many

farms and gardens on the island that the demand for compost is really high here."

Timeline

Securing this funding is the culmination of years of work by ZWV and its partners in King County.

ZWV started in 2014 with the goal of improving organic recycling on the island, and one of its first wins was encouraging the County to begin accepting yard and food waste at the Transfer

Station in 2015.

In 2018, the organization began working with the county to establish a compost facility on the island, O'Connor said. The next year, they began formally researching and reaching out to the public over the idea.

"We worked with the county for a long time. Lots of studies, lots of surveys, many, many, many hours of meetings," O'Connor said. "It's been really hard work on the part of the (compost) committee."

The project is still in the scoping phase, Basile said, so the timeline is tentative. Currently, the county estimates the following timeline:

- 2024: Issue request for proposal, with the goal of bringing a third-party operator on board by late 2024.
- 2025: Third-party operator coordinates with the division on the siting and design process.
- 2026: Construction begins in early 2026 and operations begin at the facility by late 2026.