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FEATURED

Getting the dirt: Frederick group starts doorstep composting company

By Samantha Hogan shogan@newspost.com 16 hrs ago



Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Phil Westcott, of Key City Compost, removes a bucket of compostable waste.

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Three men have taken it upon themselves to kick-start food-waste recovery in Frederick County by starting a business that picks up food scraps and turns them into usable compost.

Key City Compost offers weekly or biweekly household pickup of food scraps that would otherwise end up in a landfill. The food waste will be sent to small composting pads on local farms.

"This is something we're well-educated in," said Phil Westcott, 29, one of three co-founders of Key City Compost. Westcott works at Fox Haven Farm as the "composting wizard" and technology adviser.

The goal of Key City Compost is to demonstrate how a small, decentralized compost operation could address solid waste in Frederick County. The Frederick County What's Next steering committee, which has been examining the county's long-term waste strategy for more than a year, has explored ways to divert recyclables and food waste from the out-of-state landfill the county currently uses. The company will work separately from the committee.

"This community compost scale is a very reliable and accessible opportunity to get things going," Westcott said.

Westcott started the business with Julien Libert and Connor Self. All the men have full-time jobs, and composting is a passion project.

Key City Compost will start by focusing on residential collection. It offers doorstep pickup on Tuesdays for a nominal fee, which will include the drop-off of a clean food-scrap bin. The men dropped off compost bins to the first five customers on Feb. 7.

The food waste will be composted locally at Fox Haven Farm. As the business grows, the compost piles will be expanded to other small organic farms in the area and take up less than 5,000 square feet at each.

Maryland environmental regulations require that farms composting materials produced off-site must take up less than 5,000 square feet, and there are additional height restrictions. Five thousand square feet is roughly one-tenth of an acre — a very small area, Westcott said.

“My hope is to shine a positive light on what we can do on a farm basis,” Westcott said.

Frederick County has wood waste composting and a sludge pit, but has not yet addressed food waste composting, said Tolson DeSa, the county’s acting zoning administrator. “We really haven’t sat down and discussed it as a county,” DeSa said.

As long as the site adheres to the size restrictions, does not harbor animals, cause nuisance odors, discharge pollutants, harm the environment or create a hazard for public health, then it is allowed to operate under current law, said Kaley Laleker, the deputy director of land management at the Maryland Department of the Environment who helped write the current composting regulations. If the county establishes its own size regulations later, it will be held to the smaller size.

Howard and Prince George’s counties are strong examples of Maryland counties tackling food scrap composting, Laleker said.

The initial food waste collected will be processed in a backyard worm-bin system, Westcott said. Key City Compost will not accept meat or dairy products, which complicate the composting process, he said.

The business plans to scale up slowly to meet the needs of households properly and produce high-quality material, Westcott said.

Event composting, restaurants, schools and hospitals — especially in downtown Frederick, where there is a concentration of food waste — are in Key City Compost’s future. Even now, the company is not trying to leave anyone out and is willing to discuss what it can do to meet individual needs, Westcott said.

Residential downtown Frederick and Jefferson are the starting locations for the service. Households in Frederick County beyond these two areas can request that Key City Compost expand into their area. It will be easier to bring the service to a new area if a handful of neighbors are interested in paying for the service, Westcott said.

The company collected its first bucket of food scrap Tuesday. The composting and the eventual use or sale of the end product has not started, Westcott said. The plan is to reintroduce the compost into Frederick County’s soil.

“The whole object of our business is to help keep nutrients inside our county,” Westcott said.

Under current waste-management models, food waste is shipped to landfills along with inorganic products. The only end product is methane, which is a potent greenhouse gas. This wasteful approach degrades some of the country’s most fertile soils found in Maryland because nutrients don’t return to the soil, he said.

“We can get a lot better with how we recycle our organic matter,” Westcott said.

The most common difficulty compost producers encounter is contamination from uphill water running through the pile, Westcott said.

In anticipation of this problem, the pad where the first compost pile will go at Fox Haven Farm will be in a place where there are no uphill water sources, lined with wood chips that will act as a carbon buffer and will be covered with tarps that prevent excess moisture, Westcott said.

At a minimum, the business will provide actual metrics for the amount of composting interest and food waste in Frederick County, Westcott said.

A composting summit is planned in May at Fox Haven Farm, where producers, state policymakers and local zoning officials can discuss the future of community composting in Frederick County.

“We want to get to the bottom of what people identify a productive future is,” Westcott said.

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