



# ZERO WASTE POLICY CHANGE ECONOMIC POTENTIAL MADE POSSIBLE IN BOSTON

## Context and Need

In 2009, the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) partnered with the Blue Green Alliance, a national network of labor and environmental organizations, to research waste diversion rates in major cities across the United States. They determined that Boston had the most promising mix of low diversion, poor working conditions for recycling workers, and a public profile as progressive and environment-friendly: in short, excellent organizing potential. The ensuing [report](#) showed that achieving a 75 percent national recycling rate (Boston's hovered around ten percent) could produce 1.5 million union jobs.

GAIA and Blue Green Alliance then together approached community organizations based in Boston and active around toxics and

workers' rights to build a triple bottom line campaign that would:

1. Improve the City of Boston's diversion rate (the proportion of waste reduced upstream or diverted from traditional disposal, i.e., moving from incineration and landfilling to recycling, reuse, and composting) for climate and public health purposes
2. Improve pay and health/safety working conditions for recycling workers, and advance prospects for union organizing
3. Reduce environmental justice impacts in working class communities of color, while creating economic opportunities by growing the green economy

## History and Legal Structure

As a result, the Boston Recycling Coalition (BRC) was formed. In 2010, BRC became known as Zero Waste Boston (ZWB) to better reflect the comprehensive alternatives represented by this work. Key ZWB members included the Boston Workers Alliance (BWA) and the Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health (MassCOSH). BWA drew its membership primarily from Roxbury and Dorchester. These storied

Black neighborhoods have long been disenfranchised by structural racism and underinvestment, leading to widespread poverty - as well as the location of much of the waste industry's most polluting infrastructure. Having previously experimented with a business converting waste cooking oil into biodiesel fuel, BWA members understood how environmental organizing could provide economic and health benefits.



*About this Case Study. This case study was commissioned by the Independent Resource Generation (IRG) Hub, which seeks to position independent resource generation as a vehicle for community power building organizations to develop and embody a political leadership role with financial independence, and to strengthen social justice infrastructure that supports the evolution of independent community and worker power.*

For its part, MassCOSH primarily organized a base of Latino workers to improve working conditions, including reducing their workplace exposure to toxic materials. These campaigns provided MassCOSH with valuable experience collaborating with environmental groups. Member-leaders of both groups also had a history of informally collecting scrap metal for sale or containers for deposit, providing them with a ground-level understanding of the economic value of recycling.

An informal coalition of nonprofits, ZWB applied jointly for grants with partners acting as fiscal sponsors as needed. Decisions were made at regular campaign meetings that rotated among members and were staffed primarily by Clean Water Action and Toxics Action Center, supported by a share of funds for this purpose raised via joint campaign. This informal structure remained intact for

the decade-long duration of the program, allowing it to evolve rapidly without diverting capacity to the development of bylaws and maintenance of a board of directors. This arrangement was facilitated by pre-existing relationships and established trust amongst coalition members. Additionally, interactions with government, corporate targets, funders, earned and social media all occurred under the joint ZWB banner, despite the lack of formal legal structure.

In 2012/2013, a startup grant proposal was approved and member-leaders of BWA and MassCOSH formed Cooperative Energy, Recycling and Organics ([CERO](#)), a worker-owned coop run largely by people of color and focused on the collection of organic waste from commercial producers across the Greater Boston region. CERO then joined ZWB as a distinct partner entity.

## **Challenges that CERO Seeks to Solve**

### **Poor Municipal Data Collection**

When the campaign began, city government did not collect even basic data – like tonnage – from haulers of commercial waste, though that sector was commonly understood to be much larger in scope than the household waste collection and recycling provided and regulated by the city. This made policy change more difficult.

### **Lack of Local Innovation**

Policy decisions were made in the Environment Department but implemented through the Public Works Department, and neither would move without the other's buy-in. This required ZWB to organize the primary actors at City Hall. Through GAIA programs and with assistance from frustrated state environmental officials eager to encourage Boston's waste reduction efforts, ZWB facilitated explorations of policy innovation in other cities for City staff, while growing its own identity as part of a worldwide network responding to unchecked pollution and exploitation by this industry on a global scale.

### **Trust Amongst Partners**

From the start, campaign partners had a firm resolve not to compromise the interests of any one constituency in exchange for achieving the goals of another constituency.

## ***Benefits of the CERO Model***

### **Crowdfunding Capacity**

In 2014, CERO crowdfunded several hundred thousand dollars via a direct public offering utilized to purchase essential equipment. Though legally structured as a worker-owned cooperative, Massachusetts law allowed CERO to raise funds from investors statewide, i.e., supporters of the organizational vision who then received shares of the business in exchange.

### **Policy Change Created Service Demand**

Also in 2014, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) finalized and implemented its commercial organics [waste ban](#). This update to an existing broader waste ban created demand for CERO's services and enabled the development of

a new revenue stream for Black and brown workers from communities long denied economic agency. It also allowed the City to take advantage of an alternate model to its longstanding waste contractor base.

### **Improved Economic Opportunities**

ZWB's demands sought to lift all boats by ensuring that Boston's recyclables processing contracts adhered to living wage laws – after a series of exemptions over previous contract iterations allowed the contractor to continue paying its largely Latino immigrant workforce a sub-living wage. CERO also provided pathways for workers from Boston's environmental justice communities into new economic opportunities created through the zero waste plan.

## ***How CERO Enables Values-Based Policies***

### **Community- and Philanthropy-Resourced Policy**

Key policy interventions can be resourced by philanthropy and other sources in communities looking to implement innovations or replicate successful models, thus inviting in sufficient and well-timed startup capital to challenge at scale a regressive status quo.

### **Cross Sector Relationships Develop and Support Market Niche**

Successful campaigns by environmental organizers pushed MassDEP to add commercial organic waste to its waste ban, i.e., materials that disposal facilities are prohibited from accepting. Following the ban, facilities were limited to one ton per week generated by large producers (colleges, supermarkets). Following this critical policy change, the ZWB applied for a Barr Foundation grant to cover startup funding for a cooperative enterprise focused on organic waste and composting. The shift in state policy also coincided with the election of a new mayor, Marty Walsh, who came from a labor organizing background.

ZWB seized the opportunity to publicly raise campaign priorities – particularly regarding exploited workers of color – and Barr Foundation had the mayor's ear on making climate change a priority, which worked to the campaign's benefit.

### **If At First You Don't Succeed, Try Try Again**

The city's existing recycling contractor had the advantage of lack of competition, and as a result commanded exorbitant terms. Though the contractor eventually agreed to pay workers an increase only proportional to Boston's share of the facility's overall tonnage, municipal staff wailed about ZWB organizers blowing up the Public Works budget. This limited victory was the most difficult to achieve during the zero waste planning process. Unfortunately, one strategy has still not reached fruition: securing an official commitment from the city for preferred contracting of recycling services with a worker-owned and Boston-based business paying a living wage. Such a policy commitment, much like the state organics waste ban,

would undergird major capital investments and facilitate rapid evolution of Boston's solid waste sector into an innovative industry leader. The development of large-scale reuse/recycling infrastructure controlled by workers from environmental justice communities, is a vision that still may come to be, but for the moment is on hold.

**Continued Advocacy Helps Cement Policy**  
MassDEP, under pressure from zero waste advocates (including CERO) while finalizing its statewide 2020-2030 [Solid Waste Master](#)

[Plan](#), announced the extension of its organics waste ban threshold to 1,000 lbs (½ ton) per week, further cementing a market niche for responsible actors like CERO. Lor Holmes, CERO worker-owner and General Manager, reported a policy opportunity to counter a widespread industry practice of mixing organic waste in with municipal wastewater sludge, which puts responsible re-earthing practices at a competitive disadvantage.

## **Key Considerations for the CERO Model**

### **Key Criteria**

Campaign success depends largely on whether municipal efforts keep the interests of marginalized workers, communities, and the environment at the center of zero waste planning – advancing responsible policies despite the risk of pushback from entrenched industry players milking the status quo.

### **Potential Market Disadvantage For Values-Based Businesses**

Strategic capital infusions by philanthropic foundations – perhaps resourcing research and development of strategic policy campaigns or expanding program related Investments – might be necessary to dramatically alter a landscape currently biased towards extraction from people and nature.

### **Stronger Together**

Grassroots groups partnering with vision-aligned officials can build the policy frameworks and ground game that enables the development and success of worker-controlled businesses like CERO that are rooted in their communities.

### **Room to Grow**

Policymakers are often under the thumb of large corporate players and public works managers are accustomed to a 20th century status quo: there is nothing if not room to grow. Fortunately, zero waste imaginations are afire with innovation and shared learning, and thoughtful investments can bring a radically reimagined future well within reach.

*Note: From 2010-2020, Alex Papali (author of this case study) was campaign lead for the Zero Waste Boston coalition, formerly Boston Recycling Coalition. Zero Waste Boston's member organizations represented the interests of low-wealth communities of color, waste industry workers, and the environment. In April 2010, Alex joined the Massachusetts staff of environmental nonprofit Clean Water Action, which focused locally on energy matters and reducing toxins in consumer products and the environment. Just prior to his arrival, Clean Water and a few allies doing similar work in Boston had been approached by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) about developing a campaign around Boston's low recycling rate and improving working conditions for workers in the industry. Alex was subsequently tasked with running the campaign.*