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Intelligent Urban Infrastructure

FAQ

Multifamily Waste Diversion

Frequently Asked **Questions**

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Multifamily Waste Diversion Frequently Asked Questions

Multifamily waste diversion is one of the hardest parts of the residential waste system to get right. Residents share infrastructure, individual use is often relatively anonymous, site teams have limited time, and trash is often still the easiest and most familiar option. Apartments and buildings also often lack space for storing and separating materials.

This FAQ brings together common practical questions about multifamily waste and recycling systems, with a focus on resident behavior, infrastructure, material quality, operations, outreach, accountability, and long-term performance.

Understanding the Challenge

1. Why is multifamily waste diversion so difficult?

Multifamily waste diversion is difficult because the system has to work for many different people, using shared infrastructure, often with limited supervision and little direct accountability.

Residents may have different routines, languages, habits, expectations, and levels of knowledge about recycling or organics. Site teams may be dealing with high turnover, legacy building layouts, contamination, dumping, limited space, and pressure to keep shared areas clean.

That does not mean residents are unwilling to participate. More often, the system is asking for the right behavior without making it easy enough. In many buildings, trash still requires less effort than recycling and organics. When that happens, diversion starts off at a disadvantage.

2. Why do residents not use the bins we've provided?

Providing bins is only one part of the answer. The real question is whether the entire journey is easy enough.

Residents may not use recycling or organics bins if they have nowhere practical to separate materials at home, if the shared bins are farther away than trash, poorly labeled, unpleasant to use, hidden from view, or hard to access. This is especially important for organics.

A useful test is this: can a resident separate, carry, and deposit recycling or organics without the process feeling like an awkward extra task? If not, the system is probably losing the participation of many well-intentioned residents.

3. Is poor performance mainly a resident education problem?

Education matters. Residents need clear information about what belongs where. But most disposal decisions happen quickly, and if the physical setup is inconvenient, unclear, anonymous, or unpleasant to use, better communication can only go so far.

Good outreach works best when the infrastructure is already doing the heavy lifting. It can reinforce a strong system, but it rarely compensates for a weak one.

Designing the System

4. What does "point of deposit" mean in multifamily housing?

In multifamily housing, there are really two points of deposit. The first is inside the apartment, where residents decide whether to separate food scraps and recycling in the first place. The second is the shared building system: the chute, bin room, or external enclosure.

Both matter, but they do different jobs. In-home separation needs to be practical and space-efficient. Shared infrastructure needs to make correct deposit convenient, clear, and protected from contamination.

Better-performing systems support both stages without making participation feel like too much work.

5. How do we make recycling and organics easier for residents?

Multifamily diversion improves when the right action feels practical in the normal flow of daily life.

Starting inside the apartment, residents need simple ways to separate and store materials without losing too much space. For organics, that might mean a small kitchen pail. For recycling, it may mean reusable bags that hang on the back of a door, or compact containers.

The shared recycling and organics containers should be visible, clean, easy to use without touching dirty surfaces, and located where residents already pass through the building or site, so that residents are not being asked to make separate trips for each material.

The aim is to remove unnecessary friction from the behavior you want. If recycling or organics feel like an awkward extra step, participation will always be harder to sustain.

6. How do we protect recycling and organics from contamination and misuse?

Once participation is made easier, the next challenge is protecting material quality.

Open systems make access simple, but they also make contamination and misuse easier. In shared residential settings, a system that is too open may allow the wrong materials into recycling or organics, invite dumping, or turn every container into general trash.

This is where the right kind of control matters. Shaped or slotted openings can help guide materials into the right stream and keep bulky or incorrect items out. Controlled-access lids can reduce anonymous misuse in higher-risk areas and create a stronger basis for accountability.

For organics, control is especially important because the stream is highly contamination-sensitive and difficult to clean up once mixed. For recycling, aperture design and clear separation can help protect material quality before it reaches the hauler or MRF.

The goal is not to make the system difficult. It is to add enough structure to protect quality while keeping correct participation simple.

7. Are open dumpsters, enclosures, or access-controlled lids better?

Open dumpsters are usually the weakest option where contamination, dumping, pests, or poor site appearance are recurring problems.

Open dumpsters are easy to use, but that is also their limitation. They make it easy to put almost anything anywhere. In shared residential settings, that can lead to cross-contamination, illegal dumping, exposed waste, pests, odors, and more work for site teams.

Traditional enclosures improve appearance and can help prevent unauthorized use, but they may still hide many of the same problems inside. Compact, external-loaded enclosures can control usage without leaving space for bulky items, making the shared waste area better managed.

Slotted or shaped lids provide a simple form of passive control by guiding the right materials into the right stream and making some forms of contamination harder. Controlled-access lids go further by linking access to approved users, reducing anonymous misuse.

Controlled access should not be used just for the sake of control, but it can be valuable where open access is undermining performance. The best system is usually the one that balances convenience with the right level of structure and accountability.

Building Types and Space Constraints

8. How can we increase waste diversion in single-chute buildings?

Single-chute buildings are challenging because trash is built into the resident journey, but recycling and organics are not. If residents can dispose of trash without leaving the floor, but recycling or organics require a separate trip, diversion starts off at a disadvantage.

In many such cases, the goal is not perfect parity, but reducing the imbalance as much as possible. Residents need a simple way to separate materials in the apartment and a convenient route for depositing them later when they leave the building.

That might mean locating recycling and organics near entrances, mail rooms, parking routes, lobby areas, or other places residents already pass regularly.

The system should make diversion feel like a normal part of the disposal routine rather than an awkward extra task. Where contamination or dumping is persistent, more structured deposit points or controlled access may also be needed.

In some buildings, operators also consider closing trash chutes, especially where the system is old, high-maintenance, prone to blockages, or has been identified as a fire risk. In those cases, the issue is also safety, maintenance, and long-term building management.

Closing chutes can help rebalance resident behavior by reducing the convenience gap between trash and recycling or organics. However, if chutes are closed without providing convenient, well-located alternatives, the result may simply be more dumping or misuse elsewhere.

Where chute changes are being considered, they should be paired with better shared deposit points, clear resident communication, accessible routes, and a servicing plan that can handle the shift in material flow.

9. What can we do to improve waste diversion in twin-chute buildings?

Twin-chute buildings can support separation well, because trash and recycling are usually equally convenient for residents. The challenge is that equal convenience does not automatically mean correct use.

The main risk is contamination. If the chutes are poorly labeled, visually similar, or residents are unclear about what belongs where, the recycling chute can quickly become another route for general trash. Clear signage, color coding, simple icons, and repeated prompts at the hopper can all help reinforce the right choice.

The hopper design may also matter. Smaller or shaped openings can help prevent bulky items, bagged trash, or incorrect materials being forced into the recycling stream. In some buildings, controlled-access hoppers may also help where contamination or anonymous misuse is persistent, although any chute intervention needs to be considered alongside fire safety, accessibility, maintenance, and local code requirements.

Organics are a different challenge. Twin-chute systems often do not provide a good route for food scraps, and the default solution can become a small, smelly organics bin in the chute room. That may be convenient, but it can also create odor, hygiene, and servicing issues.

Moving organics to a cleaner, better-contained deposit point outside the building may require residents to make more effort, so the location and user experience become important. However, it can remove many of the odor and cleanliness problems associated with storing food scraps on residential floors.

10. How is the lack of space for recycling services being addressed in existing buildings?

Space is one of the most common barriers in existing multifamily buildings.

Inside apartments, residents may have limited room for multiple containers, kitchen caddies, bags, or bulky cardboard. Around the building, many properties were designed around trash disposal rather than multiple separated streams.

The best approach is usually to look at the resident journey and available service points together. Options can include compact in-home caddies, resident starter kits, external enclosures, consolidated recycling points near entrances or parking areas, smaller containers with more frequent servicing, shared collection areas between buildings, or converting underused service areas into structured waste and recycling zones.

Where there is simply not enough space within the building or site, some communities may need to consider shared on-street or curbside containers. These can help provide access to recycling or organics where internal storage and rear-lot collection are not practical, but they need careful planning around resident convenience, streetscape impact, accessibility, fire safety, parking, servicing access, and contamination control.

The key is to avoid treating recycling and organics as something that simply gets squeezed into leftover space. If the system is hidden, cramped, or awkward, participation is likely to suffer.

11. Are there creative solutions that work with other development code requirements, such as landscaping, parking, setbacks, and access?

Yes. On every project, waste and recycling infrastructure has to work within planning, landscaping, parking, fire access, accessibility, setbacks, and servicing requirements.

To be successful, we must treat waste infrastructure as part of the site design rather than an afterthought. That might mean using external enclosures that fit the surrounding streetscape, placing collection points along existing pedestrian routes, integrating screening or landscaping, using compact footprints, or locating infrastructure where it supports both resident convenience and hauler access.

Fire and life safety also need to be considered, especially where combustible materials such as cardboard or bulky waste may accumulate. Collection points should be reviewed in relation to building openings, facade materials, fire routes, exits, vents, overhangs, and other sensitive locations. The aim is to avoid creating a convenient waste location that introduces a new fire, obstruction, or operational risk.

Good layout also has to balance three different journeys: the resident journey, the hauler journey, and the site-team journey. Residents need a location that is easy and intuitive to use. Haulers need safe, efficient access for collection vehicles and crews. Site teams may need to move carts, bulky items, or overflow material around the property without creating extra handling, long walking distances, or conflict with pedestrians, parking, landscaping, or building operations.

The important thing is to involve waste planning early. If waste and recycling are considered late in the design process, they often end up in compromised locations that are difficult for residents to use, difficult for staff to manage, and difficult for haulers to service.

Operations and Common Problems

12. Why do we get bulky waste left in or around dumpster enclosures?

Bulky waste often appears when residents do not have a clear, convenient, and trusted route for disposing of larger items.

Apartments usually have limited storage space, so residents may not be able to hold furniture, mattresses, appliances, or large cardboard until a future collection date. If the process is unclear or inconvenient, those items often end up at the nearest waste area.

The answer is usually a mix of operational planning, infrastructure, and communication. Residents need clear instructions on what to do with bulky items, especially around move-in and move-out periods. Properties may need designated bulky waste areas, scheduled collection days, booking systems, or stronger follow-up where misuse is persistent.

Regular waste and recycling infrastructure should not be expected to absorb bulky waste without a separate process.

13. How can site teams avoid getting stuck in reactive management?

Site teams often end up reacting to the same symptoms: contamination, overflow, illegal dumping, complaints, rejected material, or messy shared areas.

To move out of that cycle, the system needs to address the causes rather than only the symptoms. That means asking where trash is easier than recycling or organics, where contamination is being allowed, and where residents are unclear about what to do.

Infrastructure deficiencies are often covered with extra staffing: more cleaning, more sorting, more moving material around site, more monitoring, and more time spent responding to complaints. That is costly, difficult to sustain, and often a poor use of skilled staff time.

Better infrastructure can reduce day-to-day rework by making correct use easier and misuse less likely. Better visibility can also help teams identify which buildings, locations, or resident groups need targeted support rather than sending the same reminder to everyone.

14. How have communities managed cart-based collection from small multifamily properties, such as duplexes?

Small multifamily properties can sometimes work well with cart-based systems because they fit within single-family collection routes, but they still need clear ownership, enough space, and the right level of accountability.

Individual carts for each home can work well because responsibility is clearer. Residents know which cart belongs to them, and contamination or misuse is easier to address. The problem is that many duplexes and other small apartment sites simply do not have enough space for every unit to store separate carts for trash, recycling, and organics.

Shared carts can be more space-efficient, but they reintroduce some of the same anonymity issues seen with larger dumpsters. If everyone uses the same cart, it becomes harder to know where contamination is coming from or who is using the system incorrectly.

That does not mean shared carts cannot work, but they do need more structure. Clear labeling, color-coded lids, defined storage areas, property-specific instructions, and controlled-access lids can all help improve accountability while keeping the footprint smaller than individual cart provision for every home.

The goal is to balance space, convenience, and accountability. Individual carts may provide the clearest responsibility, but shared carts with the right controls can often be a more practical option where space is limited.

Outreach, Engagement, and Accountability

15. What outreach and education methods are most effective for multifamily residents?

The best outreach is simple, repeated, visual, and tied directly to the system residents are using.

Residents need guidance at the moments that matter: move-in, pail or bag distribution, bin rooms, chutes, enclosures, resident portals, and periodic reminders. Outreach works best when it is practical. Instead of only saying “please recycle correctly,” explain what goes where, how to manage separation in the apartment, why contamination matters, and how the system works on that property.

Starter kits can be useful, especially where they include space-efficient in-kitchen food waste pails, recycling bags, clear labels, or simple “what goes where” guidance. In-home prompts, caddy stickers, bag labels, fridge cards, and app reminders can all help support separation before residents reach the shared deposit point.

At the shared point of deposit, signage should be clear, consistent, and easy to act on. Simple icons, color coding, stream-specific lids, and clear “yes/no” material examples usually work better than long lists or generic recycling messages.

Where controlled-access containers are used, resident fobs or tagged pails and bags can also help connect outreach to actual use. That makes education more direct and gives operators a clearer route for communicating with residents about correct participation.

The most effective outreach usually combines practical in-home tools, clear point-of-deposit signage, periodic reminders, and targeted follow-up where contamination keeps recurring.

16. How can better visibility and feedback improve performance?

Ease drives participation, and control protects quality. But feedback is what helps improve performance over time.

Without visibility, teams are left reacting to symptoms. They know there is contamination, illegal dumping, overflow, or resident complaints, but they do not always know where the issue is starting.

Better visibility can help distinguish between different problems. Residents may not be separating materials at home, the shared deposit point may be confusing, or misuse may be concentrated in a particular building, floor, resident group, or stream.

Controlled-access containers with tagged pails and recycling bags can help create a clearer feedback loop where appropriate. That does not have to be punitive. It can be used to give residents better advice on correct materials, flag contamination problems, thank people for participating, or share progress through an app, resident portal, or site noticeboard.

Over time, this can support both individual and community-level improvement. Residents can see their own participation, buildings can benchmark overall diversion performance, and property teams can identify where education, servicing, or infrastructure changes would have the greatest effect.

17. How can we get the hauler, building owner, property manager, and residents on the same page?

Start by making the shared goal practical and visible.

Owners usually care about site standards, operating cost, resident experience, and reducing recurring problems. Haulers care about contamination, service efficiency, safety, and material quality. Cities care about diversion outcomes and program performance. Residents care about convenience, cleanliness, and knowing what is expected of them.

The system has to connect those interests. That means agreeing on what success looks like: cleaner waste areas, lower contamination, fewer rejected loads, fewer complaints, better participation, and less time spent reacting to problems.

One of the biggest hidden costs in weak multifamily waste systems is staff time. When infrastructure does not make correct use easy or misuse harder, site teams often end up compensating through extra cleaning, sorting, moving material, handling complaints, and monitoring waste areas. That is expensive, difficult to sustain, and usually not the best use of skilled staff time.

Better alignment comes when the infrastructure does more of the routine work, the hauler has clearer material and service expectations, the property team has fewer recurring problems to manage, and residents understand how the system is supposed to work.

Regular feedback helps. If haulers can report recurring contamination, property teams can see where issues are happening, and residents receive clear guidance or recognition, the system becomes easier to manage. Without feedback, everyone tends to experience the problem separately.

Property Manager and Landlord Engagement

18. What strategies help engage property managers and landlords?

Property managers and landlords are more likely to engage when the issue is framed around their operational priorities.

Waste diversion should not be presented only as an environmental goal. It also affects cleanliness, resident satisfaction, pest control, staff workload, service costs, end of lease experience, and the general standard of the property.

It also helps to acknowledge the practical constraints they manage every day, including limited space, resident turnover, contamination, dumping, and competing demands on site staff.

Useful strategies include making the business case clear, showing before-and-after examples, giving managers simple tools, and reducing the amount of extra work required from site teams.

19. What success stories tend to have lasting impact?

The strongest examples usually have one thing in common: they change the system, not just the message. Lasting improvement tends to come when properties make diversion easier, improve the shared point of deposit, add the right controls, and create some form of feedback or accountability.

For example, a building that simply adds more signs may see a short-term improvement. But a building that supports practical separation, relocates recycling, improves container design, clarifies streams, contains waste better, and gives residents targeted guidance is more likely to sustain progress.

The most durable results come from combining infrastructure, communication, operations, and feedback into one system.

Getting Started

20. What is the simplest way to start improving a multifamily waste system?

Start with three questions.

1. Can residents separate and store materials practically before they take them to the shared waste area?
2. Where does the shared system make trash easier than everything else?
3. And where does it do too little to protect recycling and organics?

Those questions usually reveal the most important issues quickly. They help teams move away from blaming residents and toward understanding what the system is actually encouraging.

Once those causes are clear, the next steps become more practical: reduce friction where you want participation, add structure where material quality needs protection, and use feedback to improve the system over time.