

Zero Waste Block Party Quick Guide

For Starters

Nothing is perfect. Perfection is a great goal, but be proud of waste reduction even if you can't eliminate it completely.

Zero waste means nothing is sent to landfill. While an admirable goal, it's really hard to achieve for a party because any plastic film with food on it or broken toys will probably have to go into the landfill. That said, it's possible to have very little sent to landfill from your party.

"It's always best to start at the beginning."¹ At your first planning meeting, set waste reduction goals. Questions to answer at the first planning meeting are found on page [XX]. It is really important to figure out the answers to those questions before moving forward with the planning.

Keep in mind that most people aren't familiar with a "waste station" with four options (landfill, recycle, compost, liquids). Someone will have to stand near the waste station to guide party goers. Also, party goers need to be committed to proper sorting - it's really frustrating to stand at a waste station and direct people who aren't interested in sorting their waste.

If you are composting at your block party, it's important to have 2 separate buckets: one for solids and one for liquids. The liquids can be emptied into any sewer (that is what happens to what you pour down the drains in your house).

It removes a huge expense to have pitchers of water and juice, and to use 2-liter bottles of soda instead of individual bottles, cans, or juice boxes. Juice boxes usually come with a plastic straw (not recyclable) wrapped in plastic (also not recyclable). Homemade iced tea is cheaper and healthier (can be made with or without caffeine), and lemonade is very easy and cheap to make (just water, lemon juice, and sugar!). Even buying larger (32 oz or larger) bottles of juice are cheaper than juice boxes or individual bottles, and are usually 100% recyclable.

A shopping guide is on pages 2-3. A list of questions to answer when planning starts on page 4.

¹ Glinda in *The Wizard of Oz*, MGM, 1939.

Shopping Guide

Tableware

Reusables are always preferable, but when they're not an option:

Plates: check for compostable. Either paper, pressed palm leaves, sugar cane, etc., as long as it says "compostable".

Utensils: Bamboo is best - not all of the plastic compostable utensils break down fully.

Napkins: Avoid a lot of dye - this is usually toxic and the toxins contaminate the finished compost.

Cups: Compostable plastic cups are the best option

Drinks

Water: It's important to have water. Consider buying some pitchers or dispensers instead of bottled water. Bottled water comes packaged in a ton of extra plastic, and there are a lot of emissions from transporting something that also comes out of the tap... The pitchers will save you money, and you can use them every year.

Juice: Kids expect some sort of sweet drink. Drink boxes always come with wrapped straws that are not recyclable. Consider buying larger bottles/cartons of juice and pouring for the kids. While there might be more spilling there will be less landfill waste.

Soda: If you have to have soda, consider buying 2-liter bottles instead of individual bottles. There is less wasted soda, and less plastic per serving.

Coffee/Tea: Getting cups for coffee and tea that are compostable is more of a challenge. But do you really want hot drinks at a summer block party? Consider buying a box of coffee and brewing your own tea (much less expensive).

Alcohol: No comment.

For all purchased drinks: Watch out for shrink sleeves - these are plastic sleeves that cover the entire single-serving bottle or can. They must be removed before putting the container in the recycling bin. The shrink sleeves can be recycled with plastic film at store drop-offs.

Snacks

In general: Avoid individually packaged snacks whenever possible.

Chips: A single large bag is better than individually packaged servings. Not only does this reduce food waste (if someone doesn't want to finish the whole serving, it gets wasted), but the amount of plastic per serving is MUCH less. Keep in mind that chip bags are not recyclable in any of the widely available streams (they might be recyclable through Terracycle or the new

Hefty curbside program, but Hefty has not sent intro bags to everyone who requested them yet...)

Popcorn: The same recommendations go for popcorn. Ideally, make your own popcorn - it's healthier (no added sugar, salt, or fat), and comes with no waste (the jar of kernels is recyclable).

Cupcakes: Homemade is best. Clamshells with cupcakes in slots are often not recyclable. Check for ♻️ or ♻️ (if it's a ♻️, ♻️ or ♻️, or it doesn't have one, it's not recyclable).

Sheet Cakes: Keep in mind that with store-bought sheet cakes that come on black trays, the trays are usually not recyclable. Sometimes the top is recyclable. If instead you make it from scratch, or even use a mix (and recycle the box and the film that the mix comes in, and compost the egg shells), it will be much less expense.

Fruit and Veggies

Why peel? Usually you can't taste the peel. We almost never peel fruits/veggies. Exceptions: hardshell squashes, citrus, kiwi.

Buy whole: Consider cutting the fruit and veggies yourself and compost the scraps. There is less plastic involved, the cuts will be fresher, and it will cost less. You might even be able to get the fruit at a local Farmers Market!

Meats and Cheeses

These often come in non-recyclable packaging, especially if you buy them from the supermarket shelf. Butcher paper is not recyclable in Skokie. Keep in mind that if you have these, your block party won't be 100% zero-waste. However, don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good: you can still compost and recycle most of the waste from your party and feel good that the only landfill waste from your party was the wrapping that the meat and cheese came in! Very small volume, very low weight.

Also, Whole Foods has a separate cheese section and they can wrap it in a way that is recyclable or put it in your container.

Questions to answer by category:

Goals:

How committed are we to absolutely nothing in landfill?

Are we willing to spend more money on plates, utensils, and cups so that they are compostable?

Are we willing to have napkins without tons of dye to make sure they are compostable?

Are we willing to collect plastic film wrapping to take to a store drop-off (Jewel, Mariano's Target)?

Are we willing to make an announcement about zero waste early in the party, and include information about why zero waste is important?

Do we want to have a formal waste station (liquids, compost, recycling, landfill)?

Are we committed to making sure people know how to use the waste station, and are we going to have it staffed the whole time, or assume people will be able to use it on their own?

Food:

Are we willing to cut fruit and veggies ourselves instead of buying a fruit tray?

Are we willing to take the rinds, pits, etc. to the compost?

Are we willing to make our own dips? (The film cover inside the container of most dips is too contaminated to go to the store drop-off.)

Are we going to spend time soaking aluminum pans if they have baked stuff? They can be recycled, and don't have to be perfect, but can't be completely caked with lasagna, etc.

Are we willing to forego individually wrapped food?

Gum is non-recyclable plastic.

Drinks:

Are we going to use bottles, cans, or pitchers (and/or dispensers)?

If pitchers, who is in charge of keeping them full?

For cans and bottles, is someone willing to make sure any shrink sleeves are removed before putting the can or bottle into the recycling bin?

For cans or bottles, who is in charge of taking them out of their packaging and putting it in the proper waste stream?

Dinnerware:

If we have compostable plates, is someone willing to make sure they get stacked next to the compost bucket?

If we have compostable cups, is someone willing to make sure they get emptied in the liquids bucket and stacked next to the compost bucket?

Packaging

If we buy a fruit tray, who is in charge of taking the plastic wrapping off, removing the tape from it, and putting it in with the plastic film?

Activities:

Balloons are non-recyclable landfill garbage.

Plastic toys will come in non-recyclable packaging and end up in the landfill or the sewer.

Operations:

Are we willing to have someone facilitating at the waste station the whole time? Are we willing to make an announcement early in the party? Are we willing to put the announcement in the invitations?

Do you want to make sure absolutely nothing is sent to landfill? Do you want to compost food waste? Do you want to have recycling available? Who will make sure waste goes in the right stream?

Things to keep in mind:

Most people aren't familiar with a "waste station" with four options (landfill, recycle, compost, liquids).

Bottled water comes in plastic film (read, "a lot of extra packaging").

Juice boxes with attached straws: the straw and its wrapper go to landfill.

Plastic utensils go to landfill.

Gum is non-recyclable plastic (it goes to landfill).

Balloons are non-recyclable plastic (they go to landfill).

Low waste activities:

Sidewalk chalk (although the chalk usually comes in something plastic, that plastic is often recyclable).

Egg toss (not recommended because the broken eggs will attract rats unless you rinse the street afterward).

Egg race (use boiled!).

Sack race.

Three legged race.

Bicycle parade.

Talent show.

Bounce house