



PROTECTING OUR EMPLOYEES, OUR VISITORS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A brief look at why investing in waste reduction and healthier food matters at the House of Representatives.





FROM THE CAPITOL TO YOUR OWN BACKYARD?

Most people who visit Capitol Hill – and there are millions every year – expect to take back to their home states pictures of national landmarks, good memories and a better understanding of how our government works. But what if instead they took home the trash left over from the 240,000 meals we serve our employees and guests every month? We could load up the arms of every man, woman and child with literally hundreds of thousands of soda and water bottles, half-eaten hamburgers and food containers of every shape and size.

It wouldn't be a popular part of the Congressional tour, to say the least.

And yet, in essence, that was what the House of Representatives was doing before we began our waste reduction program in December of 2007. Every month, the House paid to haul dozens of tons of garbage to area landfills. This hit the taxpayer "where they live" in two ways.

On a very simple level, they paid for us to haul the waste, which is expensive, especially if you have to do it with any kind of frequency — and we, of course, did.

But they also "paid" for it in another very important way.

"There's better quality of food here than in a traditional cafeteria. It's nice to see that our nation's capital is helping to lead the way on environmental issues." ~ VISITOR

FOOD IS NEVER GARBAGE

Sending food waste to landfills creates methane. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), methane (CH₄) is a greenhouse gas that remains in the atmosphere for approximately 9-15 years. The gas is 20 times more effective in trapping heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Prior to December of 2007, the House of Representatives was actively contributing to global warming by sending 100 percent of its cafeteria waste to landfills. All of it.

But not any more.

The House entered into a new contract with a private food services company, which resulted in a dramatic rise in sales and revenues, in large part because of the great food they offer. Because the House makes a commission on all food sold in its eateries, it was able to invest in a cutting-edge composting operation and in an entire line of completely biodegradable packaging and utensils.

So now, instead of just throwing tons of food and petroleum-based non-biodegradable packaging into landfills, the House, using a machine called a pulper, squeezes the water out of the food and compacts it along with the new biodegradable packaging. This compacting process reduces the volume of the waste by 10 to 1. The condensed waste is then sent to "composting" facilities, where it biodegrades, turning trash into topsoil in 90 days.



Approximately 80 percent of all of the House’s food waste is now being diverted from landfills. By investing in a way to produce less garbage, we ensure less methane enters our air and less trash enters “the dump up the street.”

HEALTHIER FOOD, HEALTHIER EMPLOYEES AND VISITORS

Of course, not all of our food is composted. Much of it is eaten by our employees and the legions of visitors that come to the House of Representatives every day. Our investment in our new food service operations isn’t just better for our environment, it’s better for our dining community.

Canned and frozen foods, which were shipped great distances and at great expense to the bottom line and the environment, have largely been replaced by fresh food. In fact, 85 percent of the menu items we now serve are made with fresh ingredients.

The positive change is obvious. Sales have soared since we have improved our facilities.

RECYCLING AND COMPOSTING: A WINNING COMBINATION

In their report “Solid Waste Management and Greenhouse Gases,” the EPA states:

“Waste prevention and recycling – jointly referred to as waste reduction – help us better manage the solid waste we generate. But preventing waste and recycling also are potent strategies for reducing greenhouse gases. Together, waste prevention and recycling:

- ✓ Reduce emissions from energy consumption
- ✓ Reduce emissions from incinerators
- ✓ Reduce methane emissions from landfills
- ✓ Increase storage of carbon in trees.”

Along with our composting operation, we continue to improve our recycling program. In all of our cafeterias, simple-to-understand color-coded signs encourage employees and visitors to separate compostable waste from recyclable objects and from items which cannot be composted or recycled.

Our investment in these systems, combined with the willingness and commitment of our employees and visitors, is making sure “The Hill” doesn’t produce a *mountain* of waste.

Staff:

- ~ “I make the journey from the Senate side nearly every day. I would walk through 100 degree weather to indulge in the wonder that is the House cafeteria. There’s great choice, quality and price. It’s a good deal for what you get.”
- ~ “The food tastes better than the food in the old cafeteria.”
- ~ “I really like the food. There seems to be a nice variety. It’s always clean and the staff is always friendly.”
- ~ “It surpassed my expectations. It gets crowded, but that’s because everyone wants to come here.”

Visitor:

- ~ “It’s a great value. The food was good and it wasn’t anywhere near as expensive as I would expect. The variety was impressive. If you couldn’t find something here its because you are an extremely picky person.”
- ~ “The portions and the price are both reasonable. I really like it.”
- ~ “There’s plenty to choose from. When we walked in it pleased me because we went to another cafeteria here in DC and there weren’t many choices. We asked a security guard in the Capitol where we should eat and she recommended [the Longworth cafeteria]. It’s close and it’s nice.”
- ~ “The food was great. It was quick and there was a wide selection.”



CAO.HOUSE.GOV/GREENTHECAPITOL

