

# Returnable Containers Workgroup

Purpose: The City of Ann Arbor has piloted a returnable containers program with local collaborators and restaurants over the past few years. More work is needed to take the program from the pilot stage into a full-scale program. The expected benefits of this work is better materials management, reducing waste and emissions while saving residents money.

# TEAM



Jon Mallek  
City Council Member, Ward 2



Jenn Cornell  
City Council Member, Ward 5



Anya Dale  
Commission Member



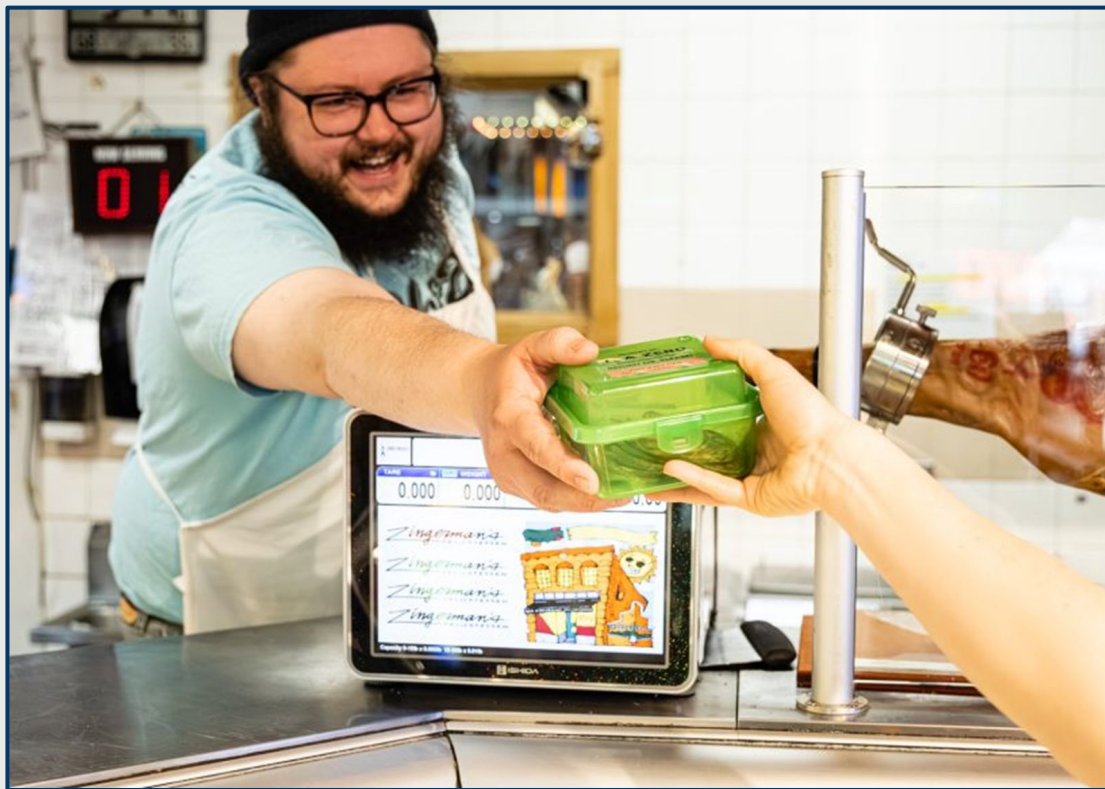
Olivia Smyth  
Commission Member

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# 2021 Pilot Program Launch

- The returnable container pilot launched in 2021 with a small but passionate group of businesses partnering with committed community volunteers.
- The City invested in an initial batch of containers, while volunteers established a check-out and check-in process.
- Restaurants enthusiastically offering the service to their customers, hosted return bins and were committed to sanitizing every single container.
- After a few months excitement was high, but participation was low.
- A<sup>2</sup>R<sup>3</sup> provided invaluable insights.
- It revealed a clear appetite for reuse in Ann Arbor and highlighted a crucial truth: with broad participation, convenience can be built, allowing reuse to move beyond a niche idea and become a practical, everyday choice for the community.
- This early experience confirms that the potential for scaling and lasting impact is real—and within our reach.





## Leading the Charge

Zingerman's Delicatessen and  
Next Door Cafe

Cinnaholic

El Harissa Market Cafe

Ginger Deli

Miss Kim

- Fast forward to 2024, a funding opportunity arose that could potentially finance taking the returnable containers program to scale.

- Together with the support of key partners, businesses, institutions and organizations, a vision was co-created and a \$20m grant proposal was submitted.

- Our proposal was to create a universal, city-wide system for returnable food and beverage ware containers to replace single-use packaging in Ann Arbor institutions, schools, venues, and restaurants.

- It placed equity at the forefront of its design by introducing a fully accessible return-incentive program, a library card system of sort, allowing every individual in every household to check out containers.

- January 2025, the grant was no longer available

- We have a beautiful vision and invested partners – and we are back to the drawing board on funding.



CITYWIDE SYSTEM

# Why go big?



## Environment

A citywide system means bigger **environmental benefits**, and a real alternative to single-use packaging



## Economics

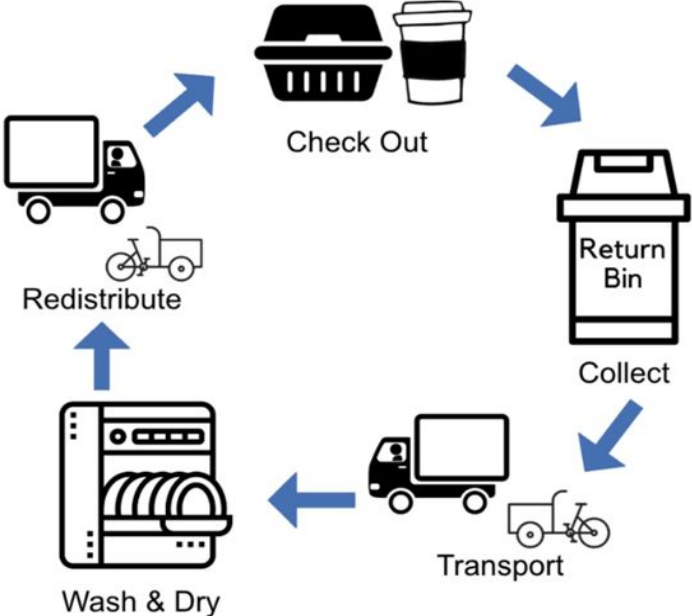
A well-used system means **lower costs** for everyone, making the system more competitive with single-use containers.



## Experience

A single system means less work for you teaching staff and customers what's going on, and a more uniform experience for residents.

# How it works



TIMELINE

# Where We Are Today



## Pilot

Gauge Interest  
Understand Challenges

## Feasibility

City Outreach  
Resident Outreach

## System Design

Restaurant Engagement  
Design Constraints

## Preparation

Fundraising  
Feedback Integration  
Recruitment

## Implementation

Build & Launch  
Continuous Improvement

# Working Group Structure

1. Working Group Structure
  - Meetings: October, December, February, March
  - Presentaion: April
2. Working Group Deliverables
  - List of similar programs in US/Canada/Europe, especially seeking to indefinitely other projects, preferably in operation and at scale
  - List/research on co-benefits of returnable containers programs Letter explaining co-benefits for OSI to use for funding requests
  - List of potential funding opportunities

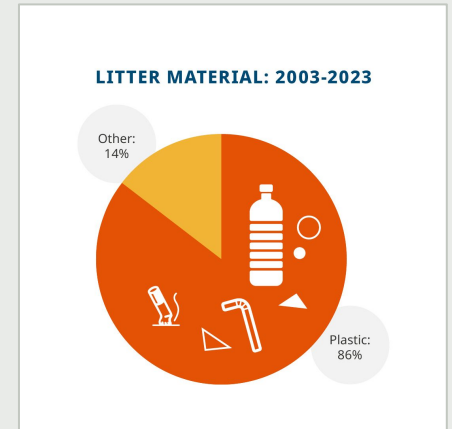
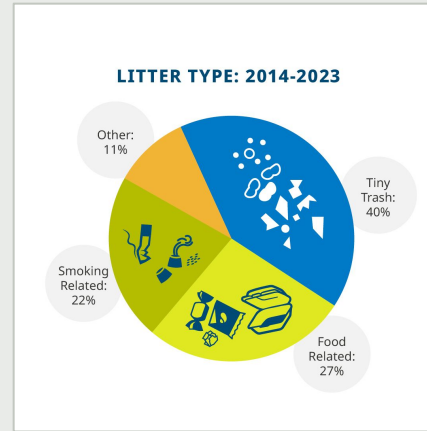
# Deliverable 1: Co-benefits of Returnable Containers

Council Member Jen Cornell and Commission Member Olivia Smyth

<p><b><u>Culture</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Culture shifts towards environmentally conscious behaviors.</li><li>- Businesses can attract eco-conscious customers and build customer loyalty by fostering repeat business and a culture of reuse.</li></ul>	<p><b><u>Economic</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reduced costs for businesses</li><li>- Decreased municipal waste costs</li><li>- Creating repeat customers</li><li>- Ambitious waste reduction agreements correlated with efficient waste collection and processing</li></ul>
<p><b><u>Community Livability/Wellbeing</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reduction of visible plastic pollution in the streets, storm drains, rivers, etc.</li><li>- Decreased trash volume and restocking frequency.</li><li>- Increased patronage of sustainable businesses</li></ul>	<p><b><u>Environment</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Reductions in petroleum use and CO2 emissions</li><li>- Decreased ingestion of plastic by animals.</li><li>- Smaller global warming potential</li></ul>

# Major Takeaways

- These benefits can only be realized if returnable container programs can be scaled up to a certain point to offset the increased use of plastic and water due to the increased weight of reusable containers and the water used to wash them.
- Great potential for co-benefits related to the Huron River
  - Reduced plastic/microplastic pollution
  - Improved water quality
  - Engaging/important to multiple stakeholders



Analysis from the Alliance for the Great Lakes used 20 years of data collected by Adopt-a-Beach volunteers on all five Great Lakes.

# Deliverable 2: Comparable Initiatives

Team: Council Member Jon Mallek and Commission Member Anya Dale

1. A list of initiatives, cities, departments, individuals that OSI can interview regarding capital needed to launch, creative financing, funding as well as identified co-benefits (US/Canada/Europe).
  - Note: Genevieve is already in conversation with Perpetual.
2. List of potential funding opportunities.

# Major Takeaways - Community Programs

[Link to Full Spreadsheet](#)

## Community Programs:

- Hilo and O'ahu, Hawaii
- Iowa City
- Ottawa
- Portland, OR

## University Programs:

- Ohio State University, Ohio University, Northern Arizona University

## Overview:

- Mix of Community and University Programs
- Mix of open-loop and closed-loop programs. Closed loop is easier (ex. w/in an institution) but means less positive impact.
- Open-loop most relevant for A2 Community
- Some require the container to be clean (Iowa) and others not
- Some are associated with apps

## Successes

- Easy collection and return at point of purchase
- Fee ONLY if not returned
- Portland uses a monthly or yearly subscription to allow more flexibility for container return timeframe
- Utilizing volunteers for outreach and engagement events
- Centralized program to coordinate collection, sanitation, and redistribution

## Challenges

- Meeting necessary threshold of # of participating locations to hit scale of effectiveness
- Rate of return is a common challenge for all programs

# Major Takeaways - Potential Funding Opportunities

## From Community Program Analysis:

- EPA's Solid Waste Recycling Infrastructure Grant
- EPA's Pollution Prevention Grants - Environmental Justice Through Safer and More Sustainable Products
- Environment and Climate Change Canada
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Marine Debris Prevention Grant
- Waste Connections and Metro
- Customers and Sustainable Dubuque Community Grant

## Institutions of Higher Ed. Programs:

- Northern Arizona University
  - University's Green Fund
- Ohio State University:
  - University - Facility Operation and Development's Resource Recycling and Sustainability and President and provost's Sustainability Fund
- Ohio University - take-out containers
  - Student fee - funded

## Other Potential Grants:

### EGLE

Circular Economy Grant

\$3M

[webpage](#)

### EPA

Solid Waste Infrastructure for Recycling Grant

[webpage](#)

### NAPECA

# Next Steps

- We have a big and bold vision to be the first city wide returnable containers program in the US
- We are working towards establishing the structure and the funding to make this happen
- We are talking with parks about having an architect come in for a preliminary assessment around need, sizing, equipment etc
- We are looking at space throughout the city, which as we know is difficult
- We are seeking collaborators that want to make this vision a reality – financial, in kind etc.



# THANK YOU!



**A<sup>2</sup>ZERO**  
EQUITABLE • SUSTAINABLE • TRANSFORMATIVE

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