



Launching Illinois' First Green Dining District

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Executive Summary

The restaurant industry in Illinois is ripe for a cooperative effort to reduce food waste, plastics, and energy use. Most independent restaurant owners want to be more sustainable but find it challenging to do so. When restaurants work independently to address these issues, their efforts are often fragmented and inefficient. We need initiatives that reduce individual upfront investment and build a sustainable business community that can address sustainability barriers together.

Illinois' first green dining district will encompass 5 areas of sustainability and will require participants to sign a pledge, complete a green practice assessment, and set core goals to reduce environmental impact. A green dining district will focus on:

- Energy Efficiency & Renewables
- Solid Waste
- Water Efficiency
- Pollution Prevention
- Transportation

A green dining district model will facilitate collective action around environmentally responsible practices. It also positions Illinois communities as sustainable food destinations, attracting customers who want dining experiences that reflect their values.

In the short term, we seek to launch Illinois' first green dining district through Takeout 25 that builds on existing successes of individual restaurants and grows their collective impact. Long term, we aim to learn from this experience to build a network of green dining districts across Illinois, engaging restaurants and inspiring communities around best green dining practices. Broadening the green dining district initiative will increase the resilience of the restaurant industry and reduce climate impacts statewide and potentially beyond

Why launch a “green dining district” now?

In the United States, about 30-40% of food gets wasted across our food supply, starting from the farm all the way to your table. Managing food waste is a critical way to combat climate change. The USDA's Economic Research Service estimates that 31% food loss occurs at the retail and consumer levels, equaling 133 billion pounds and \$161 billion worth of food in 2010¹. This wasted food creates greenhouse gas emissions both at the landfill and as the wasted food

¹ <https://www.usda.gov/foodwaste/faqs>



is transported to landfills. According to the Green Restaurant Association, an average restaurant generates 100,000 lbs. of garbage per year. An estimated 90% of that waste could be diverted through recycling and composting program.²



Food waste occurs at every stage of production in the food chain, but locally, at the restaurant level, preparation, over-ordering, overproduction, spoilage and over-sizing meal portions are the key drivers of food waste. It is estimated that about 45% of food is wasted at the preparatory stage, 21% due to improper storage, and 34% at the consumption stage, where customers leave behind scraps on their plates.³ Small, locally-owned restaurants have extremely tight budgets and profit margins. Managing food waste can reduce costs while reducing environmental impact.

Convenience and conditioning, as well as the recent pandemic, have increased the use of plastics across the food industry. The U.S. EPA estimates that only 31% of the plastics produced in the country are recovered or recycled⁴, and the plastics industry continues to grow due to customer demand for packaged food products⁵. While we know that plastics can affect marine life, pollute our waterways, and accumulate in human tissue as microplastics, it is costly for small restaurants to transition to eco-friendly alternatives. There are many different brands to choose from, and many products do not live up to their marketed environmental or food containment performance.

Additionally, the primary source of energy for cooking is natural gas, though many industry insiders and restauranteurs acknowledge that electricity may be just as good, if not better, for most commercial cooking needs. There are many energy, water and pollution reduction opportunities for restaurants, such as managing thermostat setpoints or purchasing EPA Safer Choice cleaning products, that can reduce costs, create healthier indoor air environments, and reduce environmental impact.

² <https://www.dinegreen.com/waste>

³ Principato, L., Pratesi, C. A., & Secondi, L. (2018). Towards zero waste: An exploratory study on restaurant managers. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 74, 130-137.

⁴ <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/containers-and-packaging-product-specific>

⁵ <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/north-america-food-packaging-market-repor>



So why are these seemingly low-hanging sustainability measures not more widely implemented? While certain parts of the food value chain are highly organized, the independent restaurant industry is extremely fragmented. This fragmentation leads to inefficiencies, which in turn leads to individual action being prohibitively expensive. The only realistic solution to this dilemma is collective action, which will both reduce the risk of a small, local business' sustainable actions and amplify the short and long-term benefits of sustainable solutions.

A green dining district can facilitate collective action around environmentally responsible practices. It will position the Oak Park region as a sustainable food destination and attract customers who value sustainability. Our local restaurants are already taking many sustainable actions; we want to formalize, amplify, and build on these successes. Our intent is to build a community of sustainable restaurant leaders that demonstrates the cost effectiveness, efficiency and benefits of sustainable practices. By amplifying these successes, we can encourage restaurants across Illinois to follow their lead.

What is a green dining district? What will it look like in our community?

The green dining district will be a resource hub for restaurants in Oak Park and its surrounding communities. It will amplify and advertise existing sustainability investments and encourage restaurants to learn from each other and work together to be more sustainable. Opportunities for individual action can transform into opportunities for collective action to expand their impact. A green dining district will bring restaurant owners together to provide environmentally responsible dining experiences to the community, contributing to community-wide environmental sustainability efforts.

The green dining district model is a growing trend in cities throughout the US. In some locations, green dining districts are formed by 25% of restaurant participation in a region (St. Louis Green Dining Districts), while others are community or region based (Carson City & Reno Nevada). Many green dining districts grow initiatives such as single stream recycling or composting through collective approaches or contracting. Others work together to purchase more sustainable items for their restaurants.

Green dining districts focus on five key categories of sustainability:

- Energy Efficiency & Renewables
- Solid Waste
- Water Efficiency
- Pollution Prevention
- Transportation

Across all programs, businesses must commit to participate in a sustainability assessment, set environmental goals, and eliminate the use of Styrofoam as viable alternatives come available. All programs focus on waste reduction and food recovery, while making restaurants more profitable and increasing community participation around green dining experiences. Here are two examples of successful green dining districts:

The Green Dining Alliance – St. Louis, MO



The Green Dining Alliance, a nonprofit based in St. Louis, MO, formed the nation's first green dining district in the Maplewood neighborhood. Small, locally owned restaurants in the neighborhood received a sustainability assessment, set waste reduction goals, and committed to actions such as eliminating Styrofoam, implementing single-stream recycling, and phasing in LED lighting.

Restaurants participating in the green dining district were promoted through local media to generate awareness and support. Now, the City of St. Louis has four green dining districts. These districts are helping the city reach its climate goals, while offering residents and visitors eco-friendly dining experiences.

Green Dining Nevada



Green Dining Nevada started in Carson City as a small green dining district that engaged 30 restaurants in environmental education and sustainable business practices. Restaurants banded together to increase waste diversion and collaborated to start a single-stream recycling and composting program, based on waste assessments.

Through these efforts, they diverted about 30,000 lbs. of waste in 2019. One restaurateur stated that they saved \$3,000 in one year by reducing, diverting and composting waste.

Just as these green dining districts lead their states by example, we seek to inspire restaurants in communities across Illinois to follow our lead. Green dining districts create a community around sustainable practices while helping restaurants realize cost savings. Green dining districts help strengthen local restaurant economies while reducing waste and emissions. These districts provide opportunities for restaurants to collaborate on sustainability efforts such as group buys of sustainable packaging and group composting.

Illinois' First Green Dining District

Takeout 25 and the Illinois Green Business Program have partnered to explore what a green dining district would look like for participating restaurants. This initiative spun out of an initial green business pilot project with the Village of Oak Park. The first phase of participation will begin with an assessment and a green action plan. A group of pilot restaurants will receive a green practice assessment, a simple waste assessment and a green action plan unique to their business.

A green practice assessment covers the Illinois Green Business Program's core measures in its certification program around five areas of sustainability – energy efficiency and renewables, solid waste, water efficiency, pollution prevention and transportation. Core measures are centered around understanding resource use and low-to-no-cost green practices that all restaurants can implement. It identifies existing initiatives that can be amplified and low-hanging fruit to increase efficiency, reduce costs, and reduce environmental impacts.

Part of the green practice assessment will include a waste assessment to estimate the restaurant's annual volume of waste, assess waste sorting habits, and identify opportunities to



reduce food waste. An estimate of food waste volume will be calculated to investigate composting options across Takeout 25 restaurants. A green action plan will be developed to help restaurants identify ways to incorporate sustainable practices across their stores.

Based on these assessments and green action plans, Takeout 25 and the IL Green Business Program will develop a roadmap for designing Illinois' first green dining district model within the Takeout 25 footprint (Oak Park – core of green dining district, Forest Park, Berwyn, Elmwood Park, Austin/Galewood) and seek restaurant input to finalize its design. The roadmap will include branding and a marketing plan for the green dining district. The roadmap will recommend broader opportunities for collective action to help all Takeout 25 restaurants realize the benefits of sustainability by reducing risks and costs.

The roadmap will recommend requirements and commitments for participants. Participants will commit to common sustainability goals and sign up for a green practice and waste assessment. Participants will receive an individualized green action plan and set sustainability goals. We will also support restaurants in connecting to funding for both individual and collective action to increase implementation and reduce financial impact. A green dining district participant pledge may include items such as:

- Commit to transitioning to recyclable takeout containers (eliminating Styrofoam)
- Implement single-stream recycling
- Provide silverware for to-go items on request only
- Phase-in LED lighting throughout the restaurant
- Set waste reduction and diversion goals

Some green dining districts set a goal of number of participants by region. Based on the pilot, we will recommend both a local and regional approach for the green dining district and qualifications for each. We anticipate requiring at least 25% of Takeout 25's restaurant footprint to participate in the program to deem it a green dining district in Illinois. We will recommend different levels of participation to provide higher recognition for restaurants taking on more sustainable actions. Creating opportunities for recognition and advancement will help participants continue to engage and grow their sustainable efforts, while being acknowledged for their efforts.

Ultimately, participating restaurants will identify practices that can reduce costs and increase efficiency, while providing a sustainable dining experience for customers across their region. Through this work, we will encourage other restaurants to explore green practices and encourage other communities to develop a network of collective action on climate change. We look forward to launching the first Illinois green dining district in 2023!

Who are the key stakeholders? What is their role and how are they impacted?

Local restaurants are the most impacted both in terms of effort and benefits of sustainable practices.

Residents & Visitors (Community). Customers will have dining experiences that are consistent with their values. The green dining district will build a groundswell of support among



residents for participating restaurants. Residents can take pride in being part of the first green dining district in Illinois, and visitors can encourage their own communities to follow our lead.

Municipal Government. The green dining district efforts will complement Oak Park’s Climate Action Plan by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The green dining district can also support the district’s waste diversion and sustainable purchasing efforts.

Business Districts and Associations will introduce businesses to the green dining district opportunity and support education and engagement around the district. The green restaurant district will seek to align with business districts and associations’ sustainability goals and promote member successes.

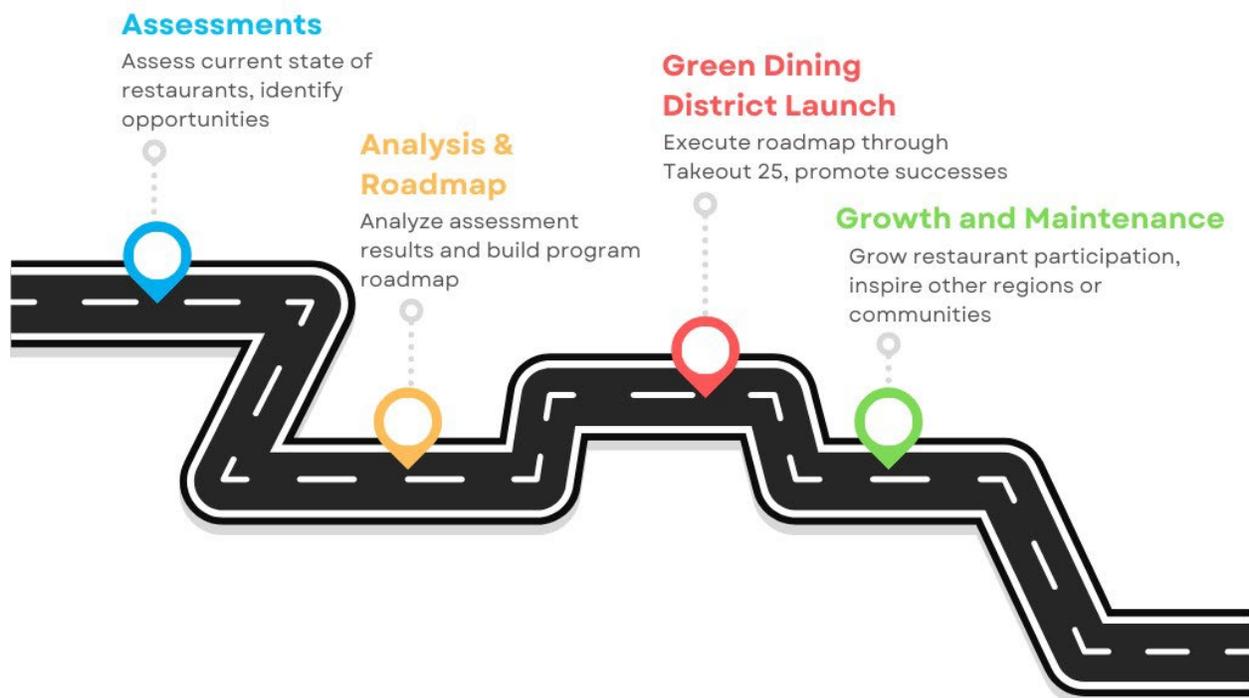
The Illinois Green Business Program brings the green dining district approach, subject matter expertise, standards and measures important to build sustainability initiatives among participating restaurants.

Takeout 25 NFP will create the local support and momentum required for executing the journey and sustaining it over time in a commercially responsible manner.

Our Approach

Our approach to develop Illinois’ first green dining district has 5 distinct stages:

Illinois Green Dining District Roadmap





Assessments (October 2022 – February 2023). Assess the current state of restaurant sustainability in the region by conducting individual assessments of a representative cross-section of local eatery types (bakery, sit-down dining, fast food or takeout only, coffee shops, etc.). Assessments will lead to the development of green action plans with sustainability recommendations for participating restaurants.

Roadmap Creation and Engagement (March - April 2023). Based on the results of the assessments, create a roadmap for the design of the green dining district, emphasizing individual and collective sustainability actions and setting district-wide goals. We will seek input from local restaurants before finalizing and executing the roadmap.

Implementation (May 2023 – April 2024). Execute the roadmap across the Takeout 25 footprint. Launch brand and promotion of the district to recruit participants. Track data and progress and share real-time results. Promote successes of participating restaurants and environmental outcomes through case studies, features, videos, and articles both in digital and print media channels, as well as through community-based events.

Inspire and Expand Impact. Share successes with other businesses and communities. Provide ongoing program assessments and adjustments to meet the goals of the green dining district and participants' needs. Ongoing evaluation may yield new measures of success to track and share. Inspire other communities to create green dining destinations across Illinois.

Outcomes and Deliverables

For each phase, success will be measured through the following outcomes and deliverables:

Assessments (October 2022 – February 2023). 10 assessments completed for a sample of restaurant types, and green action plans submitted to each participating restaurant. Summary of all assessments shared.

Roadmap creation and engagement (March - April 2023). Green dining district roadmap presented at the Takeout 25 owners meeting in April 2023 and finalized through stakeholder input. Roadmap will include an ongoing communication plan and an evaluation plan.

Implementation (May 2023 – April 2024). At least 20-30 restaurants in the Takeout 25 footprint (Oak Park, Austin/Galewood, Berwyn, Elmwood Park, River Forest, Forest Park) will be recruited to participate in the green dining district. Participating restaurants sign a pledge and participate in an initial sustainability assessment in Y1. Website and promotional materials will include case studies, feature videos and articles both in digital and print media channels. Community-based events will be promoted and hosted.

Measurement and maintenance (Ongoing). Success will be measured by recruiting at least 25% of Takeout 25's membership to begin their journey with the green dining district program (at least 20 restaurant participants). Report documenting participant implementation of green practices, including number of practices implemented and their estimated environmental impact and cost savings. Evaluation report of Y1 green dining district.



About Takeout 25 and the Illinois Green Business Program



Takeout 25: Takeout 25 NFP is a 501(c)(6) not-for-profit incorporated in Illinois. Our mission is to empower communities to support local food businesses while prioritizing sustainability and eliminating food insecurity. We seek to build a thriving and sustainable community. Takeout 25 enables this through a growing community of 12,000+ members and 80+ local restaurants in Oak Park, IL, and its neighboring communities. Started in 2020, Takeout 25 won the award for the most innovative pandemic start-up at the Illinois' Governor's Conference on Tourism in 2021 and the Village of Oak Park Green Award in 2022. We have been the feature of a Social Entrepreneurship case study developed by Batten School of Public Policy and Leadership at the University of Virginia and published by Sage Publications. Visit us @ www.takeout25.org

Illinois Green Business Program: The Illinois Green Business Program (IGBP) is a partnership between the Smart Energy Design Assistance Center (SEDAC) and the Illinois Green Business Association (IGBA) that helps businesses identify sustainable practices that reduce costs, increase operational efficiency and reduce environmental impacts in communities across Illinois. Businesses can start their sustainability journey by getting their Green Business Baseline and become recognized for their efforts through the Green Certification Program. Sustainable business is the new standard of business, and the IGBP is Illinois' business partner in realizing the benefits of sustainability. www.illinoisgba.org

