



Zero Waste Commission

City of Berkeley ZERO WASTE COMMISSION Regular Meeting

Wednesday, March 18, 2026 at 5:30 p.m.
City of Berkeley Corporation Yard (Ratcliff Building, Willow Room)
1326 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA, 94702

MEETING AGENDA

PRELIMINARY MATTERS:

- 5:30 pm 1. Call to Order by Chair and Roll Call by Secretary
- **Steven Sherman**, appointed by CM Rashi Kesarwani, District 1
 - **Claire Wilson**, appointed by CM Shoshana O'Keefe, District 5
 - **VACANT**, appointed by Mayor Adena Ishii
 - **Layla Dargahi (Vice Chair)**, appointed by CM Terry Taplin, District 2
 - **Dennis Uyat**, appointed by CM Ben Bartlett, District 3
 - **Philip Monrad**, appointed by CM Igor Tregub, District 4
 - **Sandra Curtis**, appointed by CM Brent Blackaby, District 6
 - **VACANT**, appointed by CM Cecilia Lunaparra, District 7
 - **Barun Singh**, appointed by CM Mark Humbert, District 8
- 5:35 pm 2. Approve Meeting Agenda and Order of Agenda Items
- 5:40 pm 3. Approve Draft Action Minutes:
- February 18, 2026 Regular Meeting*
- 5:45 pm 4. Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda
Speakers are allotted up to two minutes. Speakers may be allotted less time at the discretion of the Chair.
- 5:55 pm 5. Commissioner Announcements
Commissioners may make general announcements; no action will be taken.
- 6:00 pm 6. Staff Updates

DISCUSSION AND ACTION ITEMS:

Members of the public may provide comments at the end of each discussion item and prior to the vote of the Commission on any action items. Speakers are allotted up to 2 minutes.

- 6:10 pm 1. Continue Discussion of Transfer Station Rebuild and other Zero Waste Strategic Plan Initiatives

6:25 pm 2. Reflect on previous work plan; Vote to refine Zero Waste Commission Work Plan for upcoming fiscal year, including implementation through advocacy and marketing

6:45 pm 3. Discuss: If City plans to issue an RFP for recycling collection and hauling services, the Commission requests that it be tasked with reviewing and commenting on the draft RFP, to ensure alignment with the City's zero waste policy goals and decisions.

7:00 pm 4. Claire Wilson- discussion and update on CARB laws

7:15 pm 5. Subcommittee Reports Updates

7:25 pm 6. Discuss Future Agenda Items

7:30 pm 7. Adjournment

INFORMATION ITEMS:

Information items may be moved to discussion but no action will be taken

1. *Why compostable packaging fails- <https://www.packaging-gateway.com/features/why-compostable-packaging-fails/>
2. *City Contract Updates on Berkeleyside- <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2026/02/19/berkeley-contract-audit-non-competitive>

COMMUNICATIONS:

Communications from the public are included as links or attachments in the agenda packet.

***Indicates material included in the agenda packet**

**** Indicates material to be available at the meeting**

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SB 343 Disclaimer:

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Commission Secretary:

Julia A. Heath, Recycling Program Manager,
Zero Waste Division, 1201 Second St. Berkeley, CA 94710
510-981-6357
jheath@berkeleyca.gov

MINUTES

The meeting was convened at 5:36 with Layla Dargahi presiding as temporary Chair.

ROLL CALL

Present: Swasti Johri, Philip Monrad, Steven Sherman, Steven Sherman, Claire Wilson, Barun Singh, Layla Dargahi

LOA: Sandra Curtis

Absent:

STAFF PRESENT: Julia A. Heath, Johnny de Lara

MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC PRESENT: 2

PUBLIC COMMENTS (on non-agenda items): 2

ACTION MINUTES:

- **Approval of the February 18, 2026 Regular Meeting Agenda**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Dargahi/Singh) to approve the February 18, 2026 meeting agenda.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Sandra Curtis
- **Approval of the January 21, 2026 Regular Meeting Minutes**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Sherman/Monrad) to approve the January 21, 2026 meeting minutes.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Sandra Curtis
- **Public Comment**
2 public comments. No Action Taken.
 - 1 Comment from William Chui describing the Stooping Club's current initiatives in Berkeley; berkeleystooping.org
- **Commissioner Announcements**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
- **Staff Updates**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.
- **Commissioner Elections for Chair and Vice Chair**
Action Taken: M/S/C (Dargahi/ Sherman) to elect Steven Sherman as Commission Chair.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Sandra Curtis
Action Taken: M/S/C (Wilson/ Uyat) to elect Claire Wilson as Commission Vice Chair.
Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Sandra Curtis
- **Review the initiatives in the Zero Waste Strategic Plan**
Discussion only. No Action Taken.

Public Comment: 0

- **Steven Sherman- Ocean Plastics Presentation**

Discussion only. No Action Taken.

Public Comment: 0

- **Subcommittee Updates**

Discussion only. No Action Taken.

Public Comment: 0

- **Discuss Future Agenda Items**

Public Comment: 0

- Discussion and update on CARB laws – Claire Wilson
- Continue discussion of Transfer Station Rebuild and other Zero Waste Strategic Plan initiatives
- Discuss special events ordinance
- Reflect on previous work plan
- Vote to refine Zero Waste Commission Work Plan for upcoming fiscal year, including implementation through advocacy and marketing
- Discuss potential Commission field trip to model SUDs sites
- Discuss writing a formal recommendation to relocate the Berkeley Zero Waste Division

- **Adjournment at 7:35 p.m.**

M/S/C (Dargahi/ Uyat) to adjourn the meeting.

Ayes: Unanimous; Abstain: None; Absent: Sandra Curtis

The next regular meeting of the Zero Waste Commission will be held on Wednesday, March 19, 2026 at 5:30 p.m. in person at City of Berkeley Corporation Yard (Ratcliff Building, Willow Room) 1326 Allston Way, Berkeley.

Respectfully Submitted

Julia A. Heath, Secretary

No-bid city contracts could be giving Berkeley a bad deal, audit finds

Berkeley spent tens of millions of dollars on non-competitive contracts for deals that should have gone out to bid, the city's auditor found, though there was no evidence of corruption or favoritism.

By Nico Savidge

Feb. 19, 2026, 10:02 a.m.



Berkeley signed a five-year, no-bid contract with Community Conservation Centers to process the city's recycled materials in 2021. An audit found the deal should have been subject to competitive bidding. Photo: Supriya Yelimeli

Berkeley has awarded tens of millions of dollars in contracts that weren't subjected to a competitive bid process, **according to a new report**, which could lead to

the city paying too much for goods and services, or create opportunities for corruption.

The investigation by the office of City Auditor Jenny Wong found Berkeley often used non-competitive contracts in cases where it should have solicited for other bids, including in two deals for recycling services worth a combined \$41.4 million, which are up for extensions soon.

The auditors did not uncover evidence of misconduct by employees, nor did they identify any specific cases where Berkeley would have gotten a better deal if it had solicited bids from multiple prospective contractors. But the audit, released Thursday, called for an overhaul of what it described as outdated bureaucratic processes that contribute to the city's reliance on no-bid deals, noting that the competitive process "can discourage favoritism and guard against waste and fraud."

The city entered into 94 contracts, worth a total of \$43 million, without documented competition in the 2024 fiscal year, according to the audit. That was during the **tenure of Berkeley's previous city manager**, Dee Williams-Ridley.

Current City Manager Paul Buddenhagen broadly agreed with the audit's recommended changes, according to the report.

Some are already being implemented — for example, several city departments have begun using digital contract management software to approve agreements that, until recently, had to be printed out and hand-delivered from one office to another around City Hall. That process took more than a month, on average, and the audit identified cases where contracts were lost or wound up sitting for days at a time on the desks of staff members who were out of the office. About two-thirds of city contracts are now handled digitally.

Berkeley is also working to fill vacancies in its General Services Division, which has been without a leader for

more than a year, and where the audit found staff shortages contributed to delays and made it difficult to improve the contracting process.

In a statement provided by a city spokesperson Thursday afternoon, Buddenhagen wrote, “During my time as city manager, I have worked with department directors to make clear that we need to use competitive bidding when feasible, and limit the use of waivers” to exempt contracts from competition.

“All of this work under my tenure is intended to move the City towards stronger fiscal stewardship and accountability,” Buddenhagen added.

Nearly 2 in 5 no-bid deals did not meet criteria for skipping competition

In a formal competitive process, which is required for larger contracts, the city might issue a request for proposals that invites companies to submit bids to provide a good or service, then choose from those offers. For smaller deals, departments launch an informal process in which staff reach out to at least three prospective contractors for quotes.

The city also allows departments to bypass the competitive process in certain situations, such as when there is a need for emergency repairs or only one contractor is able to provide the service. Many of those non-competitive deals are also subject to approval by the City Council.

But when the auditing team — made up of Wong, audit manager Caitlin Palmer and auditor Katie Wysong — reviewed waiver forms authorizing no-bid contracts from the 2024 fiscal year, they found 38% of them did not appear to meet the criteria for skipping the competitive process.

That was also the case for two of Berkeley’s largest non-competitive deals, according to the audit. The City Council in 2021 approved a five-year contract with the Ecology

Center to handle curbside recycling, which runs through the current fiscal year and is worth \$27.3 million. It did the same with a \$14.1 million, five-year contract with Community Conservation Centers, which processes recycled material.

Neither deal met the criteria for the non-competitive process, the auditors found, but each was approved anyway. Berkeley has contracted with the two nonprofit organizations for its recycling services since the 1980s, and the auditors couldn't find evidence the city solicited bids for the work back then, either.

“While these contracts may offer the best value or best fit for Berkeley, it is difficult for the city to determine that without open competition among all potential contractors,” the auditors wrote.

Elsewhere in the audit, Wong's team appeared to reference the federal corruption scandal that helped bring down former Oakland Mayor Sheng Thao, in which authorities alleged the owners of the firm California Waste Solutions **paid bribes in exchange for favors** that included extending the company's contract for curbside recycling there. Thao has denied the allegations.

“Contract corruption cases in neighboring jurisdictions emphasize the importance of having open, competitive contracting processes,” the Berkeley audit stated.

The City Council will soon have the option to extend the contracts with Ecology Center and Community Conservation Centers for another five years, which would bring their total value to \$84.6 million.

But the audit recommended Berkeley pursue open competition for those deals before seeking approval for the extensions, and the city manager's office agreed to do so.

Practices could shut out firms from city business

The auditors also identified nearly 100 contracts that were active as of last March in which city staff signed no-bid deals that weren't valuable enough to trigger formal competition requirements, only to repeatedly extend or increase them well beyond that threshold.

One agreement with the nonprofit Youth Spirit Artworks was initially valued at \$50,000, matching the threshold for a more stringent process, then was extended over six years until it was worth more than \$700,000. A \$50,000 legal services contract with the San Francisco law firm Renee Public Law Group swelled to be worth nearly \$4.2 million. Most of those contract extensions were subject to approval by the City Council, although Berkeley's charter gives the city attorney's office the power to contract for legal services on its own.

The auditing team recommended Berkeley adopt clearer policies for contract extensions that spell out when deals should be opened back up to competition.

It also warned that continually working with the same firms and signing no-bid deals could shut out companies — including smaller businesses, and those owned by women and people of color — that might win competitive contracts with the city. A 2021 report found a **disproportionate share of Berkeley's contracts** were awarded to firms owned by white men, costing those owned by others millions of dollars each year.

In its response to the audit recommendations, which was included in the report, the city manager's office wrote that it has developed new policies for contract amendments. City Attorney Farimah Brown agreed to report her office's legal services contracts and amendments to the City Council each year.

City staff are also exploring options for a digital contract management system that could be used for all of

Berkeley's contracts, though it may be difficult to buy or implement one as Berkeley looks to cut costs in **anticipation of a deep budget deficit** this year.

Spokesperson Matthai Chakko said city staff have estimated such a system would cost \$100,000 to \$120,000 in its first year, and \$60,000 to \$80,000 per year beyond that.

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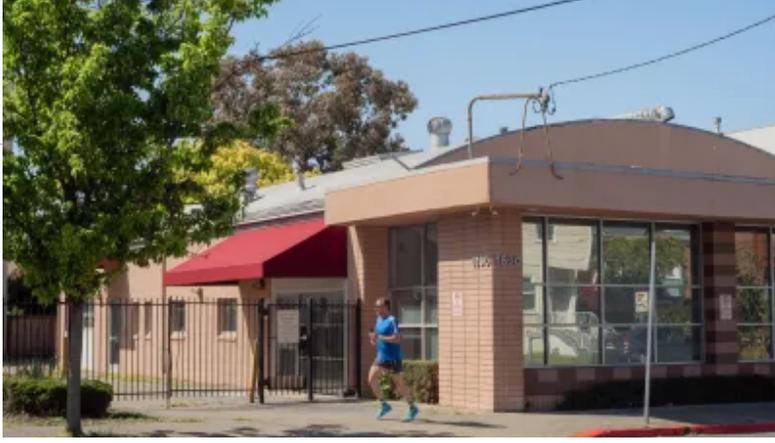
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November 21, 2021



editors@berkeleyside.org for details.

Berkeley manages its properties so poorly it lost track of a building, audit says

January 31, 2025

Why compostable packaging fails

Compostable packaging only works with industrial composting and correct disposal, conditions most waste systems lack.

Oumar Fofana | February 11, 2026

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Without proper systems, compostable materials often end up wasted or contaminating streams, undermining sustainability claims. / Credit: JpegPhotographer via Shutterstock

A takeaway cup stamped *compostable* feels like progress. For many businesses, it signals environmental responsibility without disrupting operations or customer experience.

Yet behind the reassuring label sits a system that rarely works as intended. Compostable packaging, despite good intentions, often fails to deliver meaningful environmental benefits and can sometimes make waste outcomes worse.

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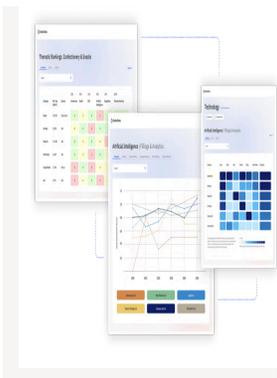
As organisations search for alternatives to plastic, compostable materials have surged in popularity. Keywords such as *compostable packaging*, *biodegradable packaging*, and *sustainable packaging solutions* dominate procurement conversations and sustainability reports.

The problem is not the concept of composting itself, but the gap between how compostable packaging is designed, how waste systems operate, and how people actually behave.

Compostable does not mean composted

The first point of failure is structural. Most compostable packaging is designed for industrial composting, not home compost heaps. Industrial composting facilities operate at high temperatures with controlled moisture and oxygen levels, breaking down materials within a defined timeframe.

Without these conditions, many compostable items behave much like conventional plastics.



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In reality, access to industrial composting is limited. Many regions lack the infrastructure to collect, sort, and process compostable packaging at scale. Even where facilities exist, they often prioritise food and garden waste over packaging due to capacity constraints and contamination risks.

As a result, compostable packaging frequently ends up in general waste, landfill, or incineration.

From a waste management perspective, this outcome undermines the purpose of compostable materials. If a compostable cup is sent to landfill, it may produce methane as it degrades anaerobically, a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide.

If it is incinerated, the material's compostable properties become irrelevant. In both cases, the environmental advantage disappears.

Contamination and confusion in real-world systems

Compostable packaging also struggles within existing recycling and waste streams. To most consumers and staff, compostable, biodegradable, and recyclable appear interchangeable. This confusion leads to misplaced items, contaminating both recycling and organic waste streams.

In recycling facilities, compostable plastics can be particularly disruptive. They often look and feel like conventional plastic but behave differently during reprocessing. Even small amounts can compromise recycled plastic batches, lowering quality and market value.

For recycling operators, this contamination increases sorting costs and rejection rates.

Organic waste streams face similar challenges. Composting facilities must meet strict quality standards for finished compost, especially when it is used in agriculture. Packaging fragments that fail to fully break down can lead to entire loads being rejected.

To manage this risk, many composters explicitly exclude compostable packaging, even when certified.

For businesses, this creates a paradox. Packaging chosen to reduce environmental impact can actively undermine recycling performance and organic waste recovery when introduced into mixed waste environments. Without clear labelling, staff training, and aligned waste contracts, compostable packaging becomes a liability rather than a solution.

Lifecycle impacts often overlooked

Beyond end-of-life issues, compostable packaging raises broader sustainability questions. Many compostable materials are derived from crops such as corn, sugarcane, or potatoes.

While renewable in theory, their cultivation involves land use, water consumption, fertilisers, and transport emissions.

When assessed through a lifecycle lens, compostable packaging does not always outperform conventional alternatives. If a material requires intensive agriculture, long-distance shipping, and industrial processing, its overall carbon footprint may rival or exceed that of recyclable plastic or paper. Sustainability claims based solely on compostability risk ignoring these upstream impacts.

Durability and performance also matter. Compostable packaging can have shorter shelf lives or lower barrier properties, leading to increased food waste.

From an environmental standpoint, wasted food almost always carries a higher carbon cost than the packaging designed to protect it. In this context, a less “green” material that reduces spoilage may deliver better outcomes.

For organisations pursuing sustainable packaging, focusing narrowly on compostability can distract from more effective strategies. Reducing material use, improving reuse systems, and choosing widely recyclable formats often provide clearer, more measurable benefits.

Why compostable packaging persists

If compostable packaging fails so often, why does it remain popular? Part of the answer lies in perception. Compostable labels offer a simple, visible signal of environmental intent, appealing to customers and stakeholders seeking reassurance.

They fit neatly into marketing narratives about circularity and nature-friendly materials.

Regulatory pressure also plays a role. In regions targeting single-use plastics, compostable alternatives can appear to offer compliance without major operational change. For businesses facing tight deadlines and limited options, compostable packaging can seem like the least disruptive path forward.

Yet simplicity at the point of purchase does not translate into simplicity at end of life. Waste systems are complex, local, and slow to adapt. Packaging choices made without reference to real-world infrastructure often shift the burden downstream, where failure is less visible but no less real.

Moving towards practical sustainability

The failure of compostable packaging does not mean composting has no role. Compostable materials work well in controlled environments where collection and processing are

guaranteed, such as closed-loop catering, events, or specific food-service settings with dedicated organic waste streams.

Outside these conditions, their effectiveness drops sharply.

For most businesses, credible sustainability starts with understanding local waste systems and designing packaging to match them. Widely recyclable materials, clear labelling, waste reduction, and reuse models tend to deliver more consistent results.

Asking where packaging will actually go, rather than where it should go in theory, is the critical step.

Why compostable packaging fails is ultimately a systems issue, not a material flaw. Until infrastructure, behaviour, and policy align, compostable packaging will continue to promise more than it delivers.

Businesses that look beyond labels and focus on real outcomes are better placed to achieve sustainability that withstands scrutiny and time.

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