The Compost Conundrum:
What should Palo Alto do with its organic waste?
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ABSTRACT (250-300 words)

A large proportion of household rubbish is organic waste – kitchen scraps and other biodegradable materials. Compost programs are increasingly heralded as an obvious step toward waste reduction; however, the most efficient way to deal with compost is not always clear. We call this question – how do we best deal with compost in the City of Palo Alto? – the “compost conundrum.” The “efficient” solution to this conundrum cannot be identified using only engineering or natural science approaches; people’s behaviors, preferences, and values must also be understood and taken into account.

We designed a project to investigate the biophysical, social, and economic dimensions of two different composting alternatives for the City of Palo Alto – decentralized backyard composting vs. curbside pick-up with centralized composting. We outlined a process for citizen engagement and biophysical investigation. We suggest that our proposal would be appropriate as a quarter-long project for a problem-based and/or service-learning class. This timely project would provide students with an opportunity to interact with leaders of the Palo Alto Green Energy and Compost Initiatives and to learn about innovative strategies for management of organic wastes.