

Portage Moving ForWaRD

by the Kent Environmental Council

Across Portage County, neighbors are launching a simple, practical idea that almost everyone can get behind: waste less food, feed more people, and keep good soil out of the landfill. It's called Portage ForWaRD, which stands for Food Waste Reduction and Diversion, and this fall it's rolling forward with a new countywide composting network built on partnership, common sense, and community pride.

The Scale of the Challenge

Food insecurity touches roughly one in six Ohioans, more than 1.8 million people statewide, and Portage County is no exception. An estimated 14.1% of Portage residents, about 22,700 of our neighbors, are facing food insecurity, including 16.5% of local children¹. These aren't abstract numbers; they show up at Kent Social Services, at Ravenna's Center of Hope, and at pantries across our townships every week.

The last couple of years have made that need grow. When pandemic-era emergency food benefits ended in 2023, Ohio households lost more than \$126 million a month in federal food assistance, and Ohio's foodbanks faced record demand: 14.66 million pantry visits in 2023 alone, followed by the highest six-month stretch of visits in the network's 35-year history by late 2024². Then came new federal cuts to food-bank supply chains in 2025, which translated locally into real numbers: the Akron-Canton Regional Foodbank reported losing two federal food programs, meaning 177,550 fewer pounds of food reaching Portage County's 26 pantries, senior programs, and youth meal sites³. Whatever anyone's politics, most of us agree on this: our neighbors shouldn't go hungry, and every community has a role to play in closing that gap.

Where the Food Actually Goes

Here's the twist: while families are going without, we are also throwing away enormous amounts of good, usable food. The USDA estimates that 31% of the entire U.S. food supply available at the retail and consumer levels—about 133 billion pounds, valued at roughly \$161.6 billion—went uneaten in a recent benchmark year. Roughly a third of that loss happens at grocery stores; the other two-thirds happens in our own homes, restaurants, and cafeterias⁴.

But that wasted food has to go somewhere, and it mostly goes into the landfills. Ohio currently operates 47 licensed solid waste landfills⁵. In the most recent statewide waste study, Ohio added 9,587,953 tons of material in a single year, and nearly a quarter of that, 2,291,521 tons (23.9%), was compostable organic material. Food alone accounted for 1,252,858 tons, or 13.1% of everything Ohio buries⁶. Put another way: roughly one out of every four truckloads heading to an Ohio landfill is carrying something that could have fed a family or enriched a garden instead.

Why It Matters for Everyone

Landfill space is finite, and nobody wants the next one built next door, so anything we can do to extend the life of existing sites is a win for every township. There's also a climate and energy angle worth noting: although compostable waste is only about 24% of what goes into landfills, it generates an outsized 58% of landfill methane emissions, and methane is a far more potent driver of atmospheric warming than carbon dioxide, pound for pound⁷. That methane could be captured and burned as a fuel for homes, businesses, or vehicles, but today, only 13 of the 73 landfills in Ohio's tracked system are actually recovering that gas for energy⁸. That's untapped opportunity coming out of the ground, waiting to be put to work (think PARTA buses).

What You Can Do Starting Today

The good news is this is a problem any household can help solve, and every small habit adds up:

- **Shop Smart.** Buy only what your family will actually eat this week; it saves money at the register as much as it keeps food out of the trash.

- **Donate the Extra.** If your pantry, garden, or event has good surplus food, Portage County has real places ready to use it: Kent Social Services accepts fresh produce and welcomes calls to arrange convenient drop-offs; Flashes Fighting Hunger at Kent State runs an active weekly produce-rescue program; and Christian Cupboard–Ravenna/Center of Hope serves families through the Akron-Canton Foodbank network⁹.
- **Compost It — Don't Trash It.** When food truly can't be eaten or donated, it belongs in a compost bin, not a garbage can.

Portage ForWaRD: Neighbors Building the Solution Together

Portage ForWaRD is a genuinely grassroots, multi-organizational effort led by the Kent Environmental Council, working alongside the Portage County Solid Waste District, the City of Kent's Sustainability Commission, Rubber City Reuse, the United Methodist Church of Kent, Kent State University, and Green Teams from churches across the county¹⁰. It's the kind of coalition—civic, academic, faith-based, and nonprofit—that shows what a community can build when it focuses on shared, practical goals instead of division.

The first visible piece of the puzzle is already in place: a free community compost drop-off bin behind the United Methodist Church of Kent (1435 E Main St, Kent, OH), made possible through the leadership of Pastor Nathan Howe and Green Team leader Claire Bank and through a donation from the Kent Environmental Council. It's open to any area resident—no fees, no hoops, just bring your food scraps. Use your won bucket or container and just dump the food scraps into the bin. Only BPI plastic bags are permitted but not necessary. More drop-off sites, coordinated through Portage ForWaRD, are on the way.

Portage ForWaRD is designed to work for real neighborhoods, not against them. It's a resident-driven program that gives everyday people the agency to make a difference, and every new site is chosen using real criteria such as population density, accessibility along commuter routes, and demonstrated community interest so the program grows where it will actually get used. Just as important, it's built to add new drop-off capacity without adding new collection trucks or traffic to our roads.

The plan ahead is a deliberate, three-phase expansion of free community composting sites across Portage County with steady, sustainable growth rather than a rushed rollout.

Reducing waste, feeding neighbors, and protecting the land we all share isn't a partisan issue; it's a Portage County issue, and it's one we can solve together, one bucket at a time.

Learn more, find a drop-off location, or get involved with Portage ForWaRD through the Kent Environmental Council (<https://kentenvironment.org>) or Rubber City Reuse (<https://www.rubbercityreuse.com>).