

## Key Takeaways

- ROD policy can advance existing municipal environmental goals.
- Collaboratively creating and shaping policy can be challenging but is also critical.
- Before the policy is passed, it's important to engage impacted businesses.
- Consider tying permits for new and remodeling businesses to the ability to comply with ROD policy.
- Offering business grants are great if you can offer them.
- Partnering with a non-governmental entity can be helpful if it's an option.
- Consider emphasizing culture change versus traditional enforcement.
- Local businesses, those involved in the community, and new/remodeling businesses can be easier to engage.
- Find and collaborate with other municipalities that are considering or have passed a similar policy.

# What does it take for municipalities to require reusables for on-site dining?

Single-use disposables are increasingly used in restaurants across North America — even when dining in. Over 20% of disposable foodware and packaging used by US restaurants and food service businesses could be eliminated today by making reusables the norm for onsite dining.<sup>1</sup> **A reuse for onsite dining policy requires restaurants and other food service businesses to provide only reusable serviceware for customers eating on the premises.** When you think about it, reuse for onsite dining is a “back to basics” transformation. Before the advent of fast food, customers enjoying a meal while out and about were automatically served with real cups, dishes, and cutlery.<sup>2</sup>

The first reuse for onsite dining (ROD) policy in North America was passed in Berkeley, California in January 2019. Since then, this sensible policy has been replicated across a number of cities and towns in the US and Canada. As of December 2023, 27 municipalities in the US and Canada have ROD policies on the books.<sup>3</sup>

Upstream spoke with three local governments from the US and Canada that are at different stages of passing and implementing ROD policy. This policy brief provides a summary of their key learnings and takeaways.

### 3 Municipalities, 3 Stories: Reuse for Onsite Dining Policy Lessons

**Bellingham, WA:** The City of Bellingham’s ordinance was one of the earliest ROD policies passed in North America.

- ♦ Population: 93,744
- ♦ Date enacted: May 24, 2021
- ♦ Took effect: July 31, 2022
- ♦ Link to policy: [Ordinance No 2021-05-023 – City of Bellingham, WA \(cob.org\)](#)

**Banff, Alberta:** The Town of Banff’s comprehensive bylaw includes many components targeting source reduction, including reuse for onsite dining.

- ♦ Population: 8,305
- ♦ Date enacted: February 13, 2023
- ♦ Took effect: The reuse for onsite dining section of this policy takes effect January 1, 2024.
- ♦ Link to policy: [Bylaw 468, Single-Use Item Reduction \(banff.ca\)](#)

**San Francisco, CA:** The City of San Francisco is currently crafting a policy at the direction of Mayor London Breed, which will be introduced shortly as the city’s reusable foodware policy.

- ♦ Population: 808,437

### Lessons Learned: Passing and Implementing Reuse for Onsite Dining Policy

**Lesson One:** Reuse for onsite dining policy can advance existing municipal environmental goals, such as landfill diversion goals, emissions reduction goals, and others outlined in Climate Action and Zero Waste Plans.

Reusables are an effective way to reduce climate emissions, plastic pollution and litter. Cities that have had the most success to date with the passage of ROD policies have harnessed these facts to demonstrate that requiring reusables for onsite dining will help them achieve their broad municipal sustainability goals.

Bellingham was motivated by residents who were eager to be on the front line of waste reduction, with this policy seen as a natural evolution of the City’s prior action on single use plastic, such as the 2012 [single use plastic bag ban ordinance](#) (since replaced by a [state ban](#)). The City developed its ROD policy within the context of the City’s [Climate Action Plan](#), which was updated in 2018 with specific metrics around waste reduction, with a focus on supporting the county’s efforts outlined in the [Comprehensive Waste Plan](#) for recycling and diversion. The State of Washington set a tone on decreasing plastic production and waste ([SB 5022](#)<sup>4</sup> & [SB 5323](#)<sup>5</sup>), which gave the City the motivation to enhance and implement state policy through their ordinance.

Waste, climate change and the associated issues resulting from these interlinked crises are very important to the Town of Banff. In its [Environmental Master Plan](#), the Town has set a target of 70% waste diversion by 2028 and an aspirational goal to reach zero waste by 2050, as well as ambitious reduction targets for its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (30%

by 2030 and 80% by 2050). Banff recognizes the role of source reducing single use disposables across all material categories (not just single use plastics) in reaching these goals, especially because they are a fairly remote community where garbage trucks must travel hundreds of miles to cart rubbish to the nearest landfill.

In San Francisco, reuse has long been a priority for local activists and advocates, resulting in its incorporation into the [City’s Climate Action Plan](#) and commitments, as well as other municipal sustainability goals. The Board considered a policy in 2019, but was paused for political and then COVID-19 reasons. In 2023, the City identified another potential window to pass a ROD policy – the next installment in a suite of zero waste policies the City has been passing since the early 2000s. Most of San Francisco’s consumers and restaurants are already choosing recyclable or compostable foodware and the focus has now shifted to reusables. The City began [offering a grant](#) in 2021 to support partial or complete transition to reusables for food businesses. The anticipated ROD ordinance is intended to move food serviceware up the waste hierarchy to help the City reach its Zero Waste goals.

**Lesson Two:** Creating and shaping policy in collaboration with the community at large can be challenging and will require compromise. However, it’s important for building buy-in and creating a more robust policy. Aligning with stakeholders on key values can help.

Involving stakeholders, whether it be business associations, community activists, or NGOs, in the policy development process will ensure these groups feel bought-in to the policy and have an opportunity to provide input. Don’t forget to engage any other municipal

departments that may need to collaborate on implementation of the new law!

In San Francisco there has been a concerted effort at the Mayor’s direction to talk with and solicit valuable input from key stakeholders before proposing an ordinance. The City has met with large, prominent event venues as well as the restaurant association, in addition to other public departments. The City has also been engaging the community through a coalition called [Reusable SF](#), which represents national, state-wide, and local organizations that are each committed to transitioning San Francisco to reusables. The City has attempted to stay in lock step with key stakeholders in crafting its proposed ROD ordinance, envisioning its implementation, and communicating with stakeholders such as businesses and the City’s board of supervisors.

Since banning expanded polystyrene (EPS) in 2007, San Francisco Department of the Environment has developed its internal capacity for and commitment to community outreach on the topic of foodware purchasing. The City has created an in-house outreach team that has built a foundation of several years of interaction with the community. This has helped the Department better understand the political landscape as well as obtain crucial insights for crafting the ROD policy itself. The City has also employed racial equity tools, like the City’s internal policy scan tool (adapted from the [Government Alliance for Race and Equity](#)), to ask questions about who may be affected by a new ROD policy and how they can address any unintended barriers. Ultimately, the City feels that all this outreach and engagement will result in a stronger policy that is more widely embraced by the community.

During the drafting of Banff’s bylaw, the Town consulted with businesses, industry associations, and the general public. The Town was already representing the environmental angle, so the key partners to consult were industry, tourism, and hospitality associ-

ations. How far to go with the policy was a question they had to ask in collaboration with other stakeholders, and at times they had to compromise on certain provisions. Crafting a policy in partnership with multiple stakeholders is challenging, and at times the Town received frustrating, albeit valuable, feedback on draft provisions. The key was finding a compromise. It's worth remembering that as a municipality you may be the passionate voice behind an initiative, but ultimately businesses, industry associations, and elected officials will breathe reality into the final product. Compromise is a critical component to robust policy.

When Banff was crafting their policy, they found it useful to frame reuse for onsite dining so it had the broadest appeal to all stakeholders. Not everyone is going to have the environment top-of-mind. Businesses in particular are busy trying to make a profit, pay their staff, and navigate supply chains. When the Town passed its bylaw, businesses were still working to overcome two years of Covid disruptions and the Town had to be very careful to make sure the policy would be supportive and flexible. It was critical to first align on values — in Banff, their policy was all about making the town beautiful, preserving it for future generations, and taking pride in the community (as opposed to saving the environment). Once stakeholders were aligned on these values, it was easier to turn attention to policy particulars.

Waste reduction strategies are nothing new in Bellingham, given the city's longstanding ban on single use plastic bags, as mentioned above, and public residential compost program that has been in place since 2008. Given historical support for waste reduction from the city and its residents, Bellingham was able to draw on strong public support from residents and business owners for its ROD ordinance. The policy was crafted in collaboration with multiple stakeholders in the private and public sector, including the County Health Department, Mayor's office, City Council, the City's contracted waste

hauler, the local composting facility, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Remember to engage other governmental departments as you develop the policy. Oversight of the bylaw may be nested within a different branch of government than business licensing or development permitting — there is a strong possibility that if you aren't talking to other departments, a non-compliant business could become established and operational.

**Lesson Three: Build trust with the business community. Before the policy is even passed, it's important to engage businesses that will be impacted. Show up and follow through with support where you can. However, be prepared that despite best efforts, some businesses will not engage.**

Be prepared for crafting a ROD policy to be more complex than you may anticipate. There are many details to keep in mind about regulated businesses. For instance, what infrastructure (dishwashers, sinks, service-ware) do they already have and what will they need to purchase? What are businesses already doing that will help them comply once the policy is passed? It's important to think through how this type of bylaw or ordinance will work for all businesses in your community and make sure it's not just targeting the ones you are really concerned about — being fair and consistent is tough, but necessary.

It is important to San Francisco to engage businesses that will be impacted by a ROD policy well in advance of any implementation. The main way the City has been doing this is through a direct grant [Commercial Reuse program](#) in partnership with [ReThink Disposable](#) — a non-profit organization that is able to methodically demonstrate the

economics of transitioning to reusables, including the added labor and dishwashing infrastructure needed to operationalize reuse. The partnership has allowed the City to develop strong local case studies that reuse for onsite dining generates business savings, which in turn can be used to bolster outreach efforts and drive business interest. To date, 100+ businesses have taken advantage of the option to switch to reusables before it's required by law. After businesses complete the Commercial Reuse program, the City often follows up to offer additional programs (e.g., energy efficiency grants), which further strengthens its business relationships. Layering the different programs the City offers has been key in San Francisco to building relationships and has allowed the City to develop a reputation as a trusted partner that supports local businesses. Businesses often think, "what's the catch?" when the government approaches them, so be sure to approach the business community with concrete support.

The City of Bellingham provided business education and outreach in advance of the effective date of the ordinance in partnership with [Sustainable Connections](#) — a nonprofit business network in Northwest Washington that focuses on advancing a regenerative local economy, climate solutions, and food systems, among other things. This was useful in building relationships with local businesses. Strong support from The Port of Bellingham also helped bolster efforts. The Port worked directly with Sustainable Connections to establish sustainability goals and waste reduction measures for its Container Village operation.

In Banff, the key word is "trust". The staff involved in the Town's [Zero Waste Action Plan](#) efforts have worked hard with a number of businesses in the community to establish trust by following through on commitments and making it clear to businesses that they aren't interested in making money or ticketing them. The Town actively tries to avoid burdening businesses with new initiatives or

bylaws in the lead up to, or during the summer high season. Banff aims to meet each business 'where they're at', which means understanding their particular challenges in achieving the community's waste goals.

However, Banff also experienced difficulty getting businesses to participate in the conversations surrounding its bylaw. A municipality can only call and email so many times before acknowledging that a business isn't planning to attend a public consultation meeting. Businesses that don't participate in the process despite ample government outreach will end up having to live with the policy results. It's an unfortunate reality that can cause issues down the road. The best thing to do is focus on feedback from the businesses that do engage, listen to their input and integrate it into the policy to the extent feasible. Do be aware that the businesses that don't show up will likely be the ones who raise the greatest resistance when the new law is passed. In some cases, you may need to make last-minute adjustments.

If you do not have well-established relationships with businesses in your jurisdiction, focus on finding those leaders and associations in the community that have broad reach and have already built trust with the business community. Having key associations on board is helpful in getting individual businesses to join your cause.

Municipalities know that building strong relationships with the regulated community *before* a new bill is introduced is best-practice. The same is true when crafting ROD policy. It's best to communicate early and often with businesses, as well as industry associations like hospitality and restaurant groups.



**Lesson Four:** Consider tying permits for new and remodeling businesses to the ability to comply with ROD policy.

There may be resistance within permitting/licensing departments to adding new requirements to their existing process. However, the leverage created by requiring new and remodeling businesses to comply with a ROD policy would be invaluable to ensure ongoing compliance. It is important to avoid potential loopholes that can arise in ROD policies from language that requires reuse for onsite dining at establishments “with capacity,” because there have been instances of new businesses intentionally *not* building in dishwashing capacity to avoid having to comply with a ROD law. Consider how a policy might also address new businesses that aren’t yet established in the jurisdiction.

All three municipalities expressed the untapped potential of integrating a business’ ability to comply with a ROD policy into permitting requirements, particularly for new or remodeling businesses. Options to prove the ability to comply include demonstrating that the necessary dishwashing infrastructure is or will be installed, or providing a business plan that incorporates reusables.

From a policy standpoint, this was a missed opportunity in Bellingham that the City encourages other municipalities to consider including in their policy when appropriate. A requirement to demonstrate the planned use of reusable serviceware in a business plan, with the City having the ability to later assess the execution of said plan, would have been ideal. The idea is not to make permitting more expensive for businesses, but rather for the municipality to have compliance assurance while providing resources to help businesses meet ordinance requirements.

Banff’s bylaw was crafted in a unique context: the Town’s goal is to encourage less take-out and more onsite dining in general. With this

in mind, the bylaw includes not only requirements for restaurants to use reusables for on-site dining; it also includes a requirement for new businesses to offer a minimum of 10 seats for on-site dining. The combination of these policy components means that essentially all new restaurants must comply with the ROD ordinance to receive a permit, because they will all be serving customers onsite. Remember it’s important to coordinate with your enforcement entity if it’s housed in a separate department.

**Lesson Five:** Business grants are great if you can offer them, whether it be for purchasing reusables or investing in dishwashing (but it’s not a deal breaker if you can’t).

One of the common hurdles to implementing ROD policy is the upfront cost burden for regulated businesses. For some establishments, the costs of investing in reusables and/or installing dishwashing can be a challenge; for others, there may not be available real estate for dishwashers or sinks (and expanding their square footage to install these would be a major cost). Municipalities implementing ROD policies have gotten creative in the ways they support the business community through navigating these challenges, often providing mini grants directly to businesses or partnering with NGOs who can offer financial support. It’s worth exploring partnerships with County or State agencies to make funds available. Additionally, [third-party dishwashing service providers](#) are rapidly expanding across North America — be sure to explore whether these services can be made available in your community to support businesses with limited space for dishwashing.

In San Francisco, the City’s partnership with ReThink Disposable (see above) has been paired with a mini-grant that encourages businesses to participate. The City offers \$500 to any business that participates with

ReThink Disposable through this partnership, which can help offset the upfront costs of transitioning to reusables. By offering cash upfront, the City is able to show their commitment to the business community while also demonstrating to businesses the pay-back and return on investment of switching to reuse. The Commercial Reuse grant has recently expanded to include up to \$1500 for dishwashing infrastructure and up to \$5000 for larger institutions and businesses to make the switch to reusables.

Banff offers a \$150 rebate to businesses for dishwashing equipment, however the largest expense for the Town’s businesses is space. The larger question for Banff businesses considering a transition to reusables is often where they might place a dishwasher given limited operating real estate. The Town actively works with businesses to find solutions to challenges, such as space constraints, that will help them comply.

Bellingham is not currently offering grants or any financial assistance to businesses transitioning to reuse. There is a hardship waiver built into the ordinance for mid-sized or small businesses who demonstrate that they can’t financially sustain the infrastructure for dishwashers. The City has expressed that it could be worthwhile to offer grants to businesses in need going forward, but would need assistance from the County or the State to make this a reality. It is always worth considering whether inter-governmental or public-private partnerships could offer the structure and funding needed to assist small businesses in complying with ROD policies.

**Lesson Six:** Partnering with a non-governmental entity can be helpful if it’s an option for your municipality, particularly for outreach and education both before and after policy becomes effective.

Local governments are often understaffed, particularly when it comes to the need to conduct extensive outreach and education. If your community has a civil society organization that’s already involved locally and actively engaging or campaigning on the topic of reuse or waste reduction, then they’ll already have a grassroots base. This could make them a valuable partner.

A key partner in Bellingham is Sustainable Connections (see above) who has been critical to outreach and education, both before and after the ordinance went into effect. The first thing the City did to implement its ROD policy was identify and catalog affected businesses in a database and partner with Sustainable Connections to manage the database and support the City’s education and outreach efforts in advance of the effective date of the law. Together, they developed an online toolkit for restaurants and business owners and conducted three in-person events before the effective date of the ordinance to prepare the regulated community. They also held two follow-up events after the law took effect. Several hundred in-person visits to businesses, conducted primarily by Sustainable Connections, provided information, tools, and support, including assistance with retrofits for businesses that had been operating for a long time. The City has also performed multiple location audits to assess compliance. Bellingham has developed an online tool to assist residents and restaurant patrons in reporting non-compliance. Reports go to the City as well as to Sustainable Connections, so they can provide further education and technical support.

ReThink Disposable has been a key partner for the City of San Francisco’s business engagement. San Francisco Environment Department is unique in having full-time outreach staff specializing in community engagement and relationship building. These staff speak some of the most common languages of SF residents and provide the majority of the direct technical assistance for the Commercial Reuse program and other departmental initiatives. As mentioned above, ReThink Disposable has been able to provide reusable foodware order fulfillment and administration to businesses that voluntarily make the transition to reuse.

In Banff the town has partnered with the [Recycling Council of Alberta](#) and the [Biosphere Institute of the Bow Valley](#) on waste and circular economy topics in general. They have supported the Town with research, waste audits, workshops, and in some cases, direct funding for intern/student positions. Although they were not directly involved in the bylaw development, engagement, and consultation steps, they were always in the background providing support.

**Lesson Seven:** Consider placing a stronger emphasis on culture change versus traditional enforcement. Proactively spotlight establishments that are in compliance to create social pressure on other businesses to act.

Classic enforcement tools, such as fines and penalties, are an element of most (if not all) ROD laws to date. However, many municipalities have focused more on softer strategies, particularly outreach and education, to encourage a deeper cultural shift to reuse. Obviously if a municipality hasn’t enacted a policy yet, the only strategy is voluntary engagement. However, even after a policy goes into effect, outreach and education

often remain primary strategies in the compliance toolbox.

Bellingham has prioritized encouraging a culture shift through consistent business engagement rather than relying on penalties or fines. The City has leaned heavily on in-person outreach, recognizing that’s been the most effective, but also utilizes the whole gamut of communication tools — calls, emails, social and print media. However, they’re quick to state that more important than the avenue for outreach is the consistency of the outreach. Being persistent in showing up and maintaining the same messaging with businesses has been important in driving compliance.

The City of Bellingham has had success using proven media strategies. For example, they released a series of videos and social media posts to spotlight local businesses that have done well complying with the ordinance. It’s been helpful in Bellingham to focus on connecting with establishments that are capable and willing to comply with the ordinance. The quicker you can shift the paradigm towards a majority of businesses attempting to comply, the quicker you’ll be able to get those last few stragglers on board.

In San Francisco, the focus is on developing incentives for compliance (“carrots” like grants and technical assistance), versus enforcement measures (“sticks” like fines and citations). There is a strong appetite for nurturing motivation within businesses as they begin to see the benefits of switching to reuse for onsite dining.

In Banff, the whole approach has been very values focused and the Town consistently ties their zero waste efforts back to keeping Banff beautiful and pristine for now and generations to come in all engagement sessions. Banff’s [Zero Waste Trailblazers](#) award program has been running for four years and aims to promote businesses that have taken the right steps on the waste diversion front. In

2024 the Town expects to update the program to shift the focus towards recognizing waste reduction/reuse efforts.

**Lesson Eight:** Locally owned businesses, businesses already engaged in the community, and businesses that are new or remodeling can be easier to engage (but remember to accommodate the business community’s language needs). Be prepared that there may be a disconnect with fast casual and chain restaurants, though they also may surprise you and become early adopters.

It can be easier to advance compliance with new and remodeled businesses versus those that have had a set business model for many years. Look for clusters of like-minded businesses, such as those that are locally owned and already engaged in the community.

In Bellingham, there is one region of the city in particular where restaurants are close together. This has enabled small groups of five to ten business owners, such as the Portal Container Village — a Port of Bellingham project — to collaborate as stewards of the ordinance and other waste reduction measures.

On the other hand, restaurants where English is used as a second language have been trickier to reach and educate. There has been a concerted effort in Bellingham to expand capacity for conducting outreach in Spanish. In San Francisco, the City’s internal communications and outreach team (mentioned above) speaks a number of languages commonly used by residents, particularly Mandarin and Spanish.

Fast casual restaurants and chains may be less receptive to local policy, particularly national corporations operating in a smaller

municipality. The City of Bellingham has had a challenging time connecting with and achieving compliance at these establishments. These establishments may not have the same intrinsic motivation and connection to the community to voluntarily move towards compliance with the ordinance, and may be less motivated by local fines and penalties.

However, national chains are not always resistant to complying with local ROD laws. In Banff, some of the largest businesses with some of the biggest supply chain and business model challenges, are already taking steps towards compliance in advance of the bylaw’s effective date. Given Banff’s environmental reputation and immense global tourist draw, it’s possible that larger chains have been more willing to transition to reusables to demonstrate their alignment with the Town’s sustainability brand. As ROD policies become more common, the ability of chains to ignore local laws will become more challenging and altering supply chains will prove more feasible.

**Lesson Nine:** Find and collaborate with colleagues in other municipalities that are considering or have passed a similar policy.

It’s valuable to connect with others that are doing this work. Joining forums like Upstream’s Government Reuse Forum, a subgroup of the [Reuse Solutions Network](#), is useful for learning from your peers and sharing experiences. San Francisco has also sought advice from regional forums like the West Coast Reuse Foodware Forum, as well as learning directly from local Bay Area partners like the City of Berkeley. If there are municipalities near you that are considering or have passed a ROD policy, connect with them. Review Upstream’s [policy tracker](#) (which is continually updated) if you are curious to see which municipalities have passed ROD policy across the US & Canada.

# Conclusion

Reuse for onsite dining is an effective way to prevent waste and has been proven to save businesses money. As ROD policies become increasingly common across the US and Canada, the sensible practice of using reusables for in-house dining will once again become normalized, bringing with it a host of benefits. If your municipality is interested in pursuing a policy or learning more please visit our website, [upstreamolutions.org](http://upstreamolutions.org) or contact us at [info@upstreamolutions.org](mailto:info@upstreamolutions.org). ♦

# Endnotes

- 1 Rich Grousset, Senior Vice President, Re:Dish– based on calculations using data from “[Overbrook Foundation: The Dirty Truth About Disposable Foodware](#)” and The Freedonia Group
- 2 [The New Reuse Economy: How reuse systems and services will revolutionize how we consume](#)
- 3 Upstream, [Reuse Policy Tracker](#).
- 4 For full Bill text see Chapter 70A.245 [RCW: RECYCLING, WASTE, AND LITTER REDUCTION](#)
- 5 For full Bill text see Chapter 70A.530 [RCW: CARRYOUT BAGS](#)