

Zero Waste Washington Re+ Durables Mini-Grant
Summary Report

***Zero Waste Washington Mini-Grant Helps Food Businesses
Transition to Reusable Serviceware***

In 2023, Zero Waste Washington sought to reduce restaurant and food establishment waste due to disposable serviceware. To achieve this goal, it launched the Re+ Mini Grant pilot project. The program provided funding for restaurants and food-service businesses to help them switch from disposable foodware to reusable products for in-house dining.

Restaurants, coffee shops, bars, breweries, and wineries in 35 King County cities, excluding Seattle, could apply for up to \$500 to purchase cups, plates, flatware, and other durable items. They could also qualify for an additional \$1500 for a dishwasher upgrade.

Zero Waste Washington staff conducted outreach to 981 businesses. They spoke with owners and managers to learn about their use of disposable foodware, discuss potential alternatives, and offer the Re+ Mini Grant. For some, the funding came at just the right time.

At a bustling family-run teriyaki restaurant, the Korean owner served meals in Styrofoam boxes. "I've been wanting to switch to large plates and real silverware for our lunch special," she explained. She also needed a small dishwasher, compact enough to fit in her narrow kitchen. Zero Waste Washington's mini grant provided the funds to make this possible.

Many coffee shops and fast-dining establishments serve beverages in single-use paper hot cups with plastic lids, even for in-house service. At an intimate coffee house, busy baristas prepared espresso drinks in the ubiquitous disposable cups. After speaking with our staff about the grant, the owner decided to purchase mugs in a range of sizes and encourage customers to choose them over the paper cups. She knew it would require a behavior shift for both employees and clients, but she decided it was important to take the step. The conversation also prompted her to consider offering a "bring your own cup" program.

While bars, pubs, wineries, and breweries all used glassware for their beverages, they frequently used disposable items like paper boats for snacks, appetizers, and light meals. One owner had been warming pre-made pizzas and other food using countless disposable oven liners. With the grant, he bought reusable silicone oven liners, plates to replace paper boats, and real silverware instead of his plastic forks and knives. "This program is awesome!" he said, pleased with both the funding and the opportunity to switch to the reusable items.

Helping restaurants, coffee shops, and other foodservice businesses abandon the use of single-use products in their dining rooms proved challenging. Businesses faced numerous significant barriers. COVID had led many fast casual restaurants to use disposable products for in-house dining. Owners and managers explained that customers preferred them because they believed they were more sanitary. But despite the end of the pandemic, a range of issues prevented them from returning to reusable serviceware. Owners expressed concern for labor costs because they would need additional staff to load and unload dishwashers. The tight labor market also made it difficult to hire workers.

The owner of a small Chinese food stand, located in a mini food court and using all disposables explained, "I would need staff to go out and clear and clean tables. I'm the cook, and I already am spending the whole day doing dishes. I wish I could do something, but it's not possible."

A lack of space in small kitchens at fast-dining eateries often made adding a dishwasher difficult and the cost of remodeling was prohibitive. One owner pointed out that, even if he installed one, loading and unloading would block the path of cooks and other staff. There was also the problem of where to store all the durable dishes and glassware.

Full-dining restaurants and bars that had dishwashers and mostly reusable dishes and serviceware encountered a different obstacle—a lack of suitable products. They commonly used disposable children's cups because they could not find suitable reusable products that could be cleaned and sanitized in the dishwasher. Children's cups also frequently had appealing graphics, which led people to take them home. Businesses often used disposable ramekins and sauce cups because they could not find a rack that kept ramekins stable in the dishwasher.

Tea, coffee, and smoothy businesses used disposable cold cups for convenience. A shop that served smoothies explained, "I use disposable smoothie cups because I need special ones that seal. The smoothy machines use disposable cups and seal them. There is a machine for reusable smoothie cups, but it is expensive."

In the end, 66 King County restaurants, coffee shops, breweries, bars, and wineries applied for the grant, and 29 applied for additional funding for dishwashers or dishwashing equipment. The grant required businesses to submit the receipts for reimbursement. Zero Waste Washington, however, added an option, offering to place orders and pay for the serviceware for businesses. 54 businesses completed the program, submitting receipts or an order for products.

Zero Waste Washington collected qualitative data to inform future projects about the barriers restaurants face when switching to reusable products. It also identified the following opportunities:

- New products such as straw less, dishwasher-safe kids cups and suitable ramekin dishwasher racks could eliminate a great deal of waste.
- Public awareness campaigns could help the customers recognize the environmental benefit of requesting a reusable cup.
- Grants could include funding for storage cabinets needed for dishes and glassware.
- Translated materials, especially in Spanish and Korean, could help overcome language barriers when communicating with business owners.
- Additionally, a reusable takeout service could gain support and reduce waste in King County: many restaurant owners expressed interest in learning about such a program.

Further efforts will be needed to support food service businesses in their transitions to reusable foodware, but momentum is building. The Re+ Mini Grant Program provided a vehicle for Zero Waste Washington to engage with owners, managers, and staff and help get the conversation started. Funding programs such as this, city ordinances requiring durable foodware, and legislation restricting disposable products, will all help to move Washington's dining practices in a more sustainable direction.