

BUILDING A CONSENSUS FOR PAY AS YOU THROW

VARIABLE RATE refuse programs have grown rapidly over the past decade. Unlike traditional systems, households in towns with “pay-as-you-throw” fees are charged based on the amount of waste disposed. The incentive to limit disposal often causes significant increases in recycling and composting. Well designed programs also encourage residents to prevent waste generation and can reduce a community’s overall municipal solid waste (MSW) costs.

Despite the benefits, trouble often comes in initiating a pay-as-you-throw program in the first place. The reaction on the part of residents to a proposed user fee system may not be entirely positive — and that can make elected officials balk at the idea. When residents pay for waste collection services indirectly (through their property taxes), they may take this service for granted as “free.” Even when households pay a flat fee, variable rates may seem like an additional cost. Selling pay-as-you-throw to residents who are convinced it’s a tax hike can be a real challenge.

Fortunately, as more communities have made the switch to variable rates, public outreach strategies have been developed to address these issues. Many ideas were presented at workshops held in September, 1995, in Washington, D.C., and Boston, Massachusetts, entitled “Pay-As-You-Throw: Can You Cash in on Waste Reduction?” The workshops were sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the International City/County Management Association.

GETTING TO YES

Community representatives at the workshops tended to see public outreach as a two-way process — educating residents about the program while seeking input from them about how it should be structured. In some of the communities, the process of soliciting input was used as a tool to overcome initial opposition. Jim Litke, the recycling coordinator for Aberdeen, Maryland (population 15,000) says the push for pay-as-you-throw developed rapidly after their county government began assessing a new tipping fee of \$35/ton.

First, the town launched a recycling program to cut waste disposal quantities. Next,

officials instituted a new flat fee to pay for most of the additional tipping and recycling costs. The fee was seen as unfair by some, because it did not take into account the amount of waste a household generated, or how much it recycled. A task force was formed to look at options. The panel proposed a variable rate refuse fee ordinance. It was to be voted on two weeks later at the next city council meeting. The idea was good, says Litke, but there wasn’t time to properly inform the public. A hostile crowd showed up to oppose the program.

Responding quickly, one of the city council members suggested a formal poll of all residents to decide the issue. That diffused some of the tension, and officials believed that if residents were given the facts and time for reflection, they would favor the change. Each of the town’s 3,500 households was mailed a polling form, including a description of the current flat fee system and the proposed pay-as-you-throw program. The form included a list of advantages showing how residents could fare better under a sticker-based variable rate program. When it was all over, nearly 40 percent of the households returned ballot forms, and more than 70 percent of respondents voted in favor of the proposal — which city council subsequently approved. The biggest single factor in the successful implementation was to give residents a sense of control. People in town did not feel that a new program was being forced upon them. Instead, they were being asked to consider the options and make a decision.

INSTRUCTIVE SETBACKS

When Janet Robins, a consultant with Resource Integration Systems, worked with the Province of Ontario to encourage the adoption of variable rates in communities, several initial setbacks highlighted the importance of public education and feedback. She learned that building a consensus allows communities to root out residents’ immediate reactions, e.g. “it’s just a tax,” or “illegal dumping will increase.”

One of the communities that Robins

Critical to implementing a variable rate refuse system is earning the support of residents, elected officials, and other key community stakeholders.

Janice L. Canterbury



Photo courtesy of the Town of Littleton

Expansion of the town’s dropoff recycling center to accept mixed paper, boxboard and a wide range of plastic types, helped build acceptance for a variable rate proposal in Littleton, New Hampshire.

EPA'S PAY-AS-YOU-THROW OUTREACH INITIATIVE

TO ENCOURAGE municipalities to consider variable rate refuse fees, EPA launched its Pay-as-you-throw Outreach Initiative in September, 1995. During workshops (which form the basis for the accompanying article), a Pay-as-You-Throw Tool Kit was introduced, containing guidebooks, audiovisual materials, news articles and a list of information resources.

Following the workshops, EPA broadcast a video conference on pay-as-you-throw and full cost accounting to more than 1,000 waste managers, municipal officials, and state representatives across the United States. Five panelists provided information and answered questions from viewers. Two similar conferences are planned before the

end of September, 1996, although no dates have been set. EPA is organizing a series of promotional workshops with groups such as the Coalition of Northeast Governors and the International City/County Management Association.

The EPA guide "Pay-As-You-Throw: Lessons Learned About Unit Pricing" (EPA530-R-94-004) is available at no cost by calling the RCRA Hotline at (800) 424-9346, or by writing to U.S. EPA, RCRA Information Center (5305), 401 M Street, S.W., Washington, DC, 20460. To request specific tools for program implementation, a Pay-as-You-Throw Tool Kit can be ordered by calling (617) 674-7275. For general information on the outreach program, contact Jan Canterbury, (703) 308-7264.

After conducting an aggressive public education program, town selectmen — who previously opposed variable rates — recognized the support among residents for the program and voiced their approval.

worked with misjudged public sentiment. "Without adequate public consultation, this town decided at the outset that they were going to propose a full system," Robins says. Under this program, residents would pay for each bag they put out for collection, and the per bag price would include all of the town's solid waste costs. Residents were given little opportunity to shape the program. When it came time for city council to make a decision, the public showed up in force. As a result, the council voted the proposal down. "It a very volatile environment, since residents felt it was the only opportunity they had to express their views," says Robins. "We learned after the fact that the public would have accepted a two-tiered system. They felt they deserved to be able to put out one bag without charge (that would be covered under their taxes), and then be charged for the remaining bags."

In another community, the town planners thought that by creating a community advisory group on variable rates, they had covered all their bases. "What they failed to do is present all the options, as well as the information the committee needed to decide which system would work best," Robins says. "When it came time to tell the city council which system they preferred, the advisory group rejected pay-as-you-throw altogether."

LITTLETON EXPERIENCE

In the New Hampshire town of Littleton (population 5,800), an increase in the cost of waste disposal services led town officials to propose variable rates. Historically, Littleton paid for waste collection through general revenues and used a municipally owned landfill for disposal, but the cost structure changed when the facility closed. The town decided against raising taxes to cover high-tipping fees at a regional landfill, says

Tony Ilacqua, Littleton's solid waste coordinator. The per household increase would have been significant, and would not have encouraged waste reduction. Instead, town planners opted for a variable rate system.

Ilacqua visited a nearby community where pay-as-you-throw had been defeated, and learned that while officials had put together a good proposal, they had not strongly pursued public support. As a result, there was a lot of misinformation, resulting in defeat. "Probably the best thing that we did was to go to a town where it failed," says Ilacqua. "We realized it is very important that everyone knows what you are talking about well before you take action."

To boost the chances for success, Ilacqua organized an education and outreach campaign. A five-page fact sheet was developed explaining the program and why it made economic sense. The point that the program was not a tax increase — but rather an alternative to a tax increase — was clearly stated. The information was distributed widely. "The grocery stores passed them out," Ilacqua says. "You were handed one if you went to cash your check at the bank. And we distributed them at town hall. If you wanted to register your car, if you wanted a marriage license, you got one — whether you wanted it or not."

The town received key backing. When one local radio station owner indicated his support, Ilacqua solicited free air time. Another station went so far as to produce shows on pay-as-you-throw in a talk radio format. In numerous meetings and forums, town officials discussed the benefits of the proposal.

Residents were encouraged to comment on variable rates and how they should be structured. The town included a phone number on the fact sheet and requested input; the comments on the radio show were noted; and ideas generated during discussions with residents were examined. The town incorporated as many suggestions as possible.

Littleton simultaneously proposed an expansion of its recycling program to accept mixed paper, boxboard and a wide range of plastic types. That step provided a psychological boost to the variable rate proposal. "The more items you can list on the recycling brochure, the more people feel that they really can reduce their costs," Ilacqua says.

The end result was easy passage of pay-as-you-throw. "Despite the history of our town meetings — where issues sometimes have been debated for three or four nights — in 10 to 15 minutes the whole thing was done," he adds. Even the town selectmen at the meeting, who previously had balked at variable rates, recognized the support among residents for the program and voiced their approval. The program remained popular after implementation. In 1994, the Chamber of Commerce named Ilacqua "citizen of the year" — an honor that amounted to a strong endorsement of the new refuse fee. ■

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