DIVERSION INCENTIVE

TESTING PAY AS YOU THROW

Pilot program in Iowa combines curbside collection with an economic incentive to reduce garbage.

Dave Block

THE ROVING depot recycling program, wherein residents drop off recyclables at trucks stationed throughout town, seemed popular enough. Unfortunately, it just was not getting the participation rate the City of Cedar Rapids, Iowa had been hoping for. With the two county landfills expected to reach capacity by 2002, something had to be done to increase the diversion rate. A paid consultant reported that the vast majority of residents could easily manage putting their garbage in one bag if they sifted out recyclables. So with the approval of a citizens advisory committee, Cedar Rapids began a 12-week pilot project on April 14, 1997 that combined curbside recycling pick up and a pay-as-you-throw policy. Participation and diversion rates rose to encouraging levels, and a citywide program could possibly extend the life of the landfills another three or four years, estimates Mark Jones, solid waste director.

There has been no limit on the amount of garbage that the 115,000 residents of Cedar Rapids have been allowed to set out, with the exception of bulk items. Residents pay $10 each month for waste management and recycling, $9.50 of which goes toward garbage collection and unlimited pick up of yard trimmings, while the rest covers the roving depot program.

The approximately 4,900 people in the selected area of the pilot program were limited to a 40-pound garbage bag or one 35-gallon can. Any additional container or item required a sticker sold for $1.25 at local stores, which helped pay for curbside collection. The roving depot program continued, along with collection at the solid waste management facility, where residents can drop off items from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

The pilot program accepted plastics #1 to #7, metal cans, aluminum foil, pie plates, newsprint, magazines, chipboard, mixed paper and corrugated cardboard at the curb. Materials such as batteries, glass, automotive lubricant containers, paper egg cartons, syringes and textiles had to be taken to a depot truck or the waste management site. Residents separated recyclables at the curbside blue box so they could be weighed separately by city workers, but the recycling vehicle broke down after only a few days. Because the MRF, operated by Corkery Recycling Services in Waterloo, Iowa, accepts commingled materials, a two-man crew used a regular garbage truck for collection and residents still separated recyclables so municipal workers could spot contaminants.

Initial projections for the pilot indicated a potential recycling participation rate of 50 percent. During the first week of the program, the participation rate was 93.2 percent, the diversion rate was 44 percent and 33.34 tons of recyclables were collected. The second week saw participation at 91.9 percent, diversion at 44.6 percent and 25 tons collected. "Prior to the pilot, homeowners who didn't use the recycling depots were throwing out a tremendous amount of recyclables, particularly paper," says Jones. By the ninth week, there was a participation rate of 91.6 percent and a diversion rate of 37 percent with 21.13 tons of recyclables collected. The solid waste director doesn't view the leveling off in numbers as an indicator of disillusionment with the program, figuring some people might be letting their recyclables accumulate occasionally.

Most of the signs have been encouraging. When Jones put a video camera in the collection truck on a route covering more than 900 homes, only 79 residents had resorted to using a garbage sticker. His workers reported positive feedback from those they encountered, accompanied by the concern that the new system would conclude at the end of the pilot project. During a visit to a local school in the pilot area, many of the students raised their hands when asked who was responsible for separation of recyclables. "That's key. If parents delegate it to their kids, it takes some pressure off and allows kids to have responsibility," Jones says.

EDUCATION AND LESSONS

That's not to say that cooperation was trouble free. Although Jones held four open houses to educate residents about the pilot program before it began, lack of public understanding posed a problem. One annoyed homeowner he encountered early in the

program, for example, didn't realize that yard trimmings were recyclable and didn't count toward the one-bag garbage limit. Jones also had to convince the resident that if he recycled everything, his trash would fit into one bag; his transparent garbage bags revealed plastic jugs. "Some people either don't understand the concept of the program, or they're not interested in changing their habits," Jones explains. "They say, 'you're making me change my lifestyle and dig through my garbage.' But they don't literally have to dig through the garbage. They just have to think, 'this item goes in the blue box and that item goes in the garbage bag.'" Many residents tried to recycle styrofoam, which wasn't accepted in the pilot program, and plastic bags, which aren't recycled in either program.

The main lesson learned from the pilot program is that for the most part, one garbage bag or can holds sufficient volume for each household, Jones says. "There are still some issues to be resolved for larger families — whether there's a perceived need for more containers or just a lifestyle change," he explains. "If they're not buying a lot of convenience foods, they should be able to stick to one bag." The other reality the program reinforced, Jones notes, is that people are reluctant to pay for garbage service. That made him wonder whether some were hoarding their garbage and awaiting the end of the pilot program. "We know some people are taking extra garbage over to neighbors," he says.

FUTURE OPTIONS

All of this will have an impact on the future of the program and waste management in Cedar Rapids. As of mid-June, Jones was determined to continue curbside collection in the pilot area past the twelfth week with a second collection vehicle on the road to cut down on stops and prevent overtime. He wasn't sure, however, whether the $1.25 stickers would remain in force since they had been presented as a 12-week restriction. The issue may become almost moot if the city decides to allow residents to put out two bags, an option Jones considers reasonable. In that case, he might follow one resident's suggestion and tie in garbage collection with recycling volume: If a resident had a full blue box, both garbage bags would be collected; for a partially full box, one bag would be taken; for no recyclables, all garbage would remain.

But the long-term fate of pay-as-you-throw and curbside collection might be out of Jones' hands. While the Bluestem Solid Waste Agency — the city-county partnership that operates the local landfills and composting facilities — is siting a new landfill, a garbage transfer station within the city limits also has been proposed, and that could decrease the financial incentive for recycling. The director would have to justify the economics of replacing the depot program with curbside collection before it could be expanded citywide. If that idea does win out, another choice will have to be made: whether the municipality or a contractor will handle collection.

Under a citywide program, a formal agreement would be set up for marketing, which Cedar Rapids could do through Corkery Recycling Services or Bluestem. The latter already is marketing recyclables from area municipalities and private haulers. Bluestem would take the risk of a down market while reaping the profits under favorable conditions. The residents of Cedar Rapids, on the other hand, would benefit by having a greater incentive to decrease the amount of nonrecyclable materials they add to the waste stream. ■

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