

Why Pay-As-You-Throw Will Save Money and Help Our Environment

America Recycles Day, which took place on November 15, passed without much fanfare. It does, however, remind us that there is much more we can be doing to “reduce, reuse, and recycle.”

One particular program has shown great results across Massachusetts in reducing municipal solid waste and increasing recycling. Known as Pay-As-You-Throw (PAYT), it deserves serious consideration in every community.

Recycling has huge economic and environmental benefits. For example, Massachusetts residents and businesses throw away 1.5 million tons of paper every year. If this paper was recycled instead, we would save more than \$100 million in disposal costs. Recycling also directly impacts climate change by reducing carbon dioxide emissions in Massachusetts by the equivalent of 2 million metric tons annually (which is equal to taking 1.6 million cars off the road for a year). Increasing recycling will conserve energy and further reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Across the Commonwealth, 129 communities have already increased their recycling rates and realized significant savings by implementing a PAYT system for trash disposal. With a PAYT system, households are charged for waste disposal based on the amount of trash they actually throw away -- in the same way we pay for electricity, gas, water & sewer, and other utilities. If a household produces less trash and recycles more, they pay less. In this way, PAYT provides a strong economic incentive to reduce waste.

Implementing PAYT is straightforward and requires only minor changes to a town's existing trash disposal system. Residents purchase specially-labeled trash bags which the town typically makes available at the Town Hall and various local stores. The town sets the price for these bags and residents must use them instead of standard black trash bags.

In Winchester, residents would continue to take their trash (in the new bags) as well as their recyclables to the transfer station. A PAYT system may require some initial monitoring to prevent illegal dumping, but does not require any additional operating expenses or capital investment.

A PAYT system offers 3 major advantages over a “flat fee” system (such as the one in Winchester where every household is charged the same \$175 per year to dispose of their trash at the transfer station):

1. *Equity*. It is fairer since residents pay only for the waste they generate rather than subsidizing those who generate more trash. This is particularly true for seniors who tend to live in smaller households and produce much less trash.

2. *Economics.* Towns pay \$60-80 per ton of solid waste that is incinerated or buried in landfills. Increasing recycling and reducing solid waste saves money for the town. The majority of households also pay less for trash disposal than they did previously under a flat fee system.

3. *Environment.* By increasing recycling, fewer natural resources are used, energy consumption is reduced, and greenhouse gas emissions are curtailed.

There are many impressive success stories from communities across Massachusetts that have already implemented a PAYT system.

The town of Ashland, for example, generated about 5,200 tons of trash each year prior to adopting PAYT in 2006. In the first year after PAYT was implemented, solid waste decreased by about 2,000 tons (38%) and recycling increased by almost 1,000 tons (98%). The overall recycling rate went from 13% to 39%, saving the town \$139,000. In these very difficult economic times, this is money that can be used instead to pay for teachers, police officers, firefighters, and other essential municipal services.

Needham, which like Winchester utilizes a transfer station for trash disposal and recycling, is another good example. Since implementing PAYT a few years ago, the town now boasts an impressive 65% recycling rate.

In Winchester, we generate about 10,000 tons of solid waste each year. Under our contract with Wheelabrator, the town pays \$64 per ton for disposal costs, resulting in an annual expense of approximately \$640,000. With a recycling rate of just 29%, there is significant potential to increase recycling, reduce solid waste, and save money for the town and our residents.

Implementing a PAYT system does require planning and needs to be supported with a strong outreach and education campaign, but there are good resources available from the state and federal governments to assist municipalities.

Given the urgent need to find savings in our municipal and household budgets and to preserve our environment, every community should evaluate implementing a PAYT system for trash disposal.

I welcome your feedback on PAYT or any other issues. Please visit our website at www.RepJasonLewis.com. You can also reach me at 617 722-2060 or by email at Jason.Lewis@state.ma.us.

Author's Note: This column was co-authored with Emma Troisi, a student at Winchester High School and a leader in the school's EcoAction Club.

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