

Recycling

Third of Three Parts

Best Practices for Pay-As-You-Throw—Implementation

Stephen P. Lisauskas

THERE ARE MANY VARIATIONS ON THE PAY-AS-YOU-THROW (PAYT) concept, as the earlier articles in this three-part series have explained. The most successful PAYT programs can reduce solid waste volumes by 50 percent or more. However, for the programs to succeed, they must be properly designed, and they must be implemented correctly.

Implementation is the final step that municipal leaders need to consider when putting in place an effective PAYT program, and it is perhaps the most important of all. Communities that implement their PAYT programs with care and community engagement are well on their way to success, while those that do not could suffer setbacks that can be difficult to overcome. The previous two articles in this series addressed best practices for choosing from among the different PAYT options (*Waste Advantage Magazine*, July 2013) and for planning for a program (*Waste Advantage Magazine*, August 2013). To complete the series, we will now look at what municipal leaders can do in the crucial weeks around program initiation to help ensure success over the long term.

Pre-Launch

The weeks leading up to the “go-live” date for a PAYT program are critical. There is a great deal that municipal leaders need to do, both to make certain that the program is in final working order and to prepare for the rush that will come upon implementation. Once the program reaches its kickoff stage, there will likely be a frantic few days when public works officials will spend more time than expected reacting to the public. The final “calm before the storm” period is the last opportunity to plan how to act and respond in a range of situations.

Proactive Communication and Resident Education

Communication about PAYT should happen early and often. As we discussed in the two prior articles in this series, municipal leaders and

managers should have already been communicating to the public the rationale for implementing PAYT. As implementation nears, these communication efforts need to continue, including print, broadcast and social media, as well as in face-to-face interactions when possible. It will be important to explain why the municipality is implementing this program and what the benefits will be for the community and individuals.

Leaders should develop a clear, concise and compelling series of key messages addressing the need for the program, its benefits to the municipality, its benefits to residents and its inherent fairness. Leaders must be well-versed on those messages, and they should use them in all face-to-face public and media interactions, as well as in all printed materials.

The fact that municipal leaders have been considering this issue—and communicating about it—for many months does not necessarily mean that all residents know about the program, and those who do know about it may have learned of it from only partially informed sources. Communicating clearly at this point will help ensure a smooth transition at launch.

This communication should also include a resident education component, explaining in detail what will be asked of residents, showing them exactly how to participate in the program, and teaching them about activities such as recycling and composting. Finally, as the program initiation date approaches, flyers should be distributed to eligible households, attached to garbage cans, and posted at transfer stations and convenience centers to make sure that residents receive direct communication about the upcoming transition.

Bag Distribution and Inventory Control

For bag-based PAYT programs, it is critical that municipalities use the pre-launch period to ensure that an appropriate supply of bags is available at local retailers and that the bags are in identifiable locations within the stores. In our experience, before a program starts, residents generally overestimate the number of bags they will need, and they “stock up” early. To be safe, stores

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The advertisement features a yellow background with a collage of images. On the left, there are two small portraits of a woman and a man. In the center, there are two covers of WasteAdvantage magazine. On the right, there is a logo for SWANA's WASTECON with a globe icon. The text is in various colors and fonts, including red, black, and blue.



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WHY THE SWITCH TO PAY AS YOU THROW?

IT'S THE SINGLE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO REDUCE TRASH AND INCREASE RECYCLING.

Believe it or not, managing residential trash is one of the most expensive things a town or city does. As costs increase and municipal budgets shrink, cities often struggle to pay for waste management—sometimes at the expense of jobs and other important municipal services.

IT'S SIMPLE.

THE TRADITIONAL WAY OF PAYING FOR TRASH

With traditional ways of paying for trash (flat fees/tax bills), there's not much motivation to recycle or reduce trash. And many see the system as unfair:

- Residents who recycle don't get the benefits of doing the right thing.
- Residents who choose to generate a lot of trash shift these costs to those (e.g., seniors, enthusiastic recyclers) who typically generate less.
- Trash is generated in unchecked, unsustainable amounts while recycling rates stagnate.

Residents have no control over their costs and little incentive to recycle.

THE PAY-AS-YOU-THROW WAY

Using city-approved trash bags can reduce trash by up to 50% or more! That's good for municipal budgets AND for residents.

- Residents control their trash costs by paying only for the trash they throw away (by buying only the bags they need). Those who generate lots of trash pay more. Those who don't, pay less.
- Residents aren't penalized with an inflexible, flat fee.
- Trash is reduced dramatically—and recycling rates skyrocket!
- Recycling is often free and may even generate revenue.

Residents are in control and are rewarded for recycling!

IT'S FAIR.



Effective resident education materials are a key factor in successful PAYT implementation. Image courtesy of WasteZero.

must stock up to 20 percent of the expected first year's supply for just the first few weeks of the program. Also, the community must work with its bag vendor to ensure that a surplus supply of bags can be delivered to retail stores rapidly in case of a shortage.

Selection of Start Date

Choosing the right day to begin the program can go a long way toward starting out on the right foot. Conversely, starting on the wrong day can lead to unnecessary confusion and disarray. In our experience, the best time to start is on a weekday that does not follow a holiday. Initiating a transfer station- or convenience center-based program on the weekend can amplify the natural confusion inherent in any transition, as more people use these facilities on the weekends and government offices are generally not well staffed to provide assistance should any issues arise. Beginning after a holiday or during a holiday week can mean dealing with the greater amount of waste often generated from parties and other events. This may give residents the impression that they will always be using an artificially high number of bags, when typically they use very few.

Finalizing Enforcement Strategy

During the program's adoption, municipal leaders likely discussed enforcement strategies, or enforcement may have been addressed long ago in illegal dumping ordinances or bylaws. These last weeks before launch are the best time to finalize the details of how these policies and laws will be implemented. Some communities will opt for personal outreach from solid waste staff to explain the issues of non-compliance prior to actual enforcement. Others choose to send warning letters either via the mail or attached to

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garbage bins, and still others levy fines upon the first infraction. How to handle enforcement is an individual choice for each community; what is important is that they determine their enforcement protocol before the program commences. This allows municipal staff to publicly set resident expectations as well as enforce the program consistently and fairly.

It is important to note, however, that in well-designed PAYT programs, program infractions are quite rare. When they do occur, they are usually minor and occur only during the program's initial few weeks. While any good program needs a well-conceived enforcement protocol, it will most likely be used only rarely.

Setting a Baseline for Illegal Dumping

Despite volumes of research to the contrary and the positive experience of thousands of cities and towns, some residents may still fear that the new program will bring with it an increase in illegal dumping. It will be helpful to establish baselines for existing locations, amounts and composition of illegal dumping prior to the program's launch, and then track and take note of any differences after implementation. Most likely, there will be little or no change. Nevertheless, establishing a baseline will give the municipality specific, credible data to steer the discussion away from a misguided perception to a discussion about what is really occurring.

Rollout

For public works officials, the first few days of a new PAYT program can feel like a blur. All at once, residents are adjusting to a new way of disposing of their trash, while public works staff are trying to support the new system and guide residents on how to do PAYT. Communities that have planned well for this stage are those that have prepared everything that can be prepared, leaving their staff ready to focus on the immediate needs of implementation, education and enforcement. There will always be a need to adjust protocol "on the fly," but if you are planning on the fly, mistakes can happen, instilling in residents a dissatisfaction with the municipality and its services.

Being On the Ground

Woody Allen once said that 80 percent of life is just showing up, but on the first few days of a new PAYT program, that number is closer to 100 percent. Having municipal staff present at transfer stations or convenience centers, on some collection routes and available at municipal government offices is essential. This allows them to observe how residents are disposing of their trash and how other municipal employees are addressing questions and concerns. Making these officials available for questions in "real time" will dramatically improve the speed by which officials can respond to and resolve questions and concerns, improving the public's experience with and perception of the program.

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Monitoring Bag Purchases

For bag-based PAYT programs, municipal staff also must stay in close contact with the retail outlets that carry the bags, calling them frequently and occasionally stopping by to take a look at the inventory. When bags are selling quickly, the store's staff may not notice it in enough time to place another order without experiencing a stock out. A constant focus on this issue is essential in these early days of the program, as there is little more frustrating for residents than to be unable to buy the bags they need to dispose of their trash.

Ongoing Management

The rush of activity that comes with program initiation subsides quickly. Once this rush is over, PAYT programs are in the ongoing management phase. At this point, a community's PAYT program feels like its previous solid waste management program in terms of the level of resources and engagement that the municipality needs to devote to it. Often, it will feel like the PAYT program runs more easily than the previous one. All the same, communities can engage in several key ongoing activities to help keep the PAYT program running efficiently and effectively.

Tracking Data

Good data collection is essential to effectively managing the long-term operations of any public service, PAYT included. Several key metrics must be tracked, including solid waste volume, recycling volume, tipping fee savings, operational savings associated with more efficient collection routes and revenue from the sale of recyclables (if available). Tracking these variables over time allows the community to measure the effectiveness of the program and adjust it if necessary. It also provides the information needed to effectively communicate program results, a critical factor that often gets overlooked by municipalities working hard to deliver excellent services with limited staffing.

Periodic Monitoring

While the in-person monitoring conducted during the first few days of implementation can be scaled back significantly in the ongoing management phase, it should not be neglected completely. To observe disposal patterns and

staff activity, staff should still occasionally ride along with a collection crew or inspect the contents of the hopper at the transfer station or convenience center. Continued communication with retail outlets is also important to make sure that supplies are adequate and distribution is going smoothly.

Regular Reporting and Stakeholder Review

Municipal leaders must use the data and observations that they gather to report on the success of the PAYT program and keep stakeholders apprised of trends. Via the media, leaders should communicate with residents on a regular basis—twice a year or annually—about the program's success in reducing waste, increasing recycling and saving the municipality money. Keeping these positive results top-of-mind for policymakers and residents will help ensure continued support for the program and for Public Works in general.

Plan and Manage Carefully

Putting a pay-as-you-throw program in place is not difficult, but the process does have many moving parts that must be planned for and managed carefully. Communities that follow the steps laid out in this series are well on their way to having an effective, well-run PAYT program that meets municipal goals for fiscal savings, fairness and equitability to residents, and sustainability. | **WA**

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