

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

PART II

Building Consensus and Planning for Unit Pricing

Unit pricing involves many important decisions regarding how to perform and pay for solid waste services. To be sure that their communities are choosing the best options, many solid waste agencies have initiated a planning process that helps lay the groundwork for sound decisions and coordinated implementation. This process helps clarify the community's solid waste needs and goals, identify likely barriers and methods of overcoming them, and inform and educate residents about unit pricing and how it can improve solid waste management in the community.



Setting Goals and Establishing a Unit Pricing Team

Solid waste management can be a confusing business, with success measured against standards as varied as recycling diversion rates, total costs, or even quality of media coverage. For this reason, the first step when planning for unit pricing is to determine the goals of the program based on a review of your community's solid waste management needs and concerns. While goal-setting can at first seem like an abstract exercise, clearly defined and measurable objectives for your program are invaluable when deciding which unit pricing options would work best in your community. Goal-setting can help build community consensus and facilitate efficient monitoring and evaluation of the unit pricing program's progress.

Although you will want to solicit input from local residents and other interested parties before coming up with a final list of goals, it is useful to first examine and prioritize goals internally before introducing them to the community. Consider holding an internal brainstorming session to establish a preliminary list of goals. This session could last anywhere from one hour to half a day, depending on the size and makeup of your community, the issues that need to be addressed in the session, and the needs and structure of your agency. A shorter, followup session to revisit, refine, and prioritize goals also might be useful.

Prioritizing goals also is important since the weight that you assign to goals now will help you design the rate structure for the program. (Setting rate structures is described in Part III of the guide.) In addition, achieving every objective on a community's list can be difficult. Consider the tradeoffs among program costs, citizen convenience, staffing changes, and other factors as you prioritize your goals. Circumstances often require compromise in one area in exchange for progress in another.

Specific goals and objectives can vary significantly among communities. Examples include:

- **Encouraging waste prevention and recycling.** A community should set unit prices at levels high enough to encourage households to reduce waste generation and to recycle and compost. This helps to achieve existing recycling goals and to conserve landfill space.
- **Raising sufficient revenue to cover municipal solid waste management costs.** A unit pricing program should bring in enough revenue to cover both the program's variable costs and its more stable or fixed costs. Variable costs, such as landfill tipping fees, are the expenses that fluctuate with changes in the amount of solid waste collected. Fixed costs are costs that change only rarely, such as rent for agency offices, or that change only after large-scale waste collection changes, such as the number of collection trucks needed.



TRADEOFFS



HIERARCHY



COSTS

Establishing a clear set of goals for your unit pricing program is invaluable when deciding which program options will work best in your community.

- **Subsidizing other community programs.** A community might wish to generate revenues in excess of the actual costs for solid waste collection and then use those funds to enforce antilittering or illegal dumping laws, or to improve its recycling and solid waste infrastructure.

Once your agency has established a list of preliminary goals, consider setting up a unit pricing team or citizen advisory council to help you refine and prioritize these goals. A unit pricing team typically consists of solid waste staff, interested elected officials, civic leaders, and representatives from affected businesses in the community. Team members may be solicited through advertisements in local newspapers and on radio and television stations. Including these individuals in the planning process gives the community a sense of program ownership.

In addition, team members can help other residents in the community understand the specifics of the program as it evolves and can provide your agency with valuable input on residents' concerns about the program. Members of the team also can serve as a sounding board to help ensure strong community participation throughout the planning process.

Addressing Barriers



BARRIERS

The team or council also can help your agency identify potential barriers to implementing unit pricing in your community and consider ways in which these barriers can be addressed. Illegal dumping and burning of waste is one of the mostly frequently cited barriers to unit pricing. Yet participants at EPA's Unit Pricing Roundtable and

communities with unit pricing programs report that illegal dumping has occurred prior to implementing a program and tends to persist at some level, regardless of the way in which residents are charged for solid waste management.

The key is to design a unit pricing program that significantly deters illegal dumping and burning. Public education and enforcement policies are the most effective tools in addressing this barrier. Informing residents of the experiences of communities with unit pricing and setting up fair but aggressive enforcement policies to respond to incidents of illegal dumping also are essential.

Other potential barriers to unit pricing include recovering expenses, covering administrative costs, ensuring that unit pricing is not perceived as a rate increase by residents, implementing unit pricing in multi-family buildings, addressing physical or financial difficulties for senior citizens, and overcoming resistance to changing



A unit pricing team composed of residents, civic leaders, and town officials can help ensure the development of a successful unit pricing program.

the status quo. (Part III of this guide provides an in-depth discussion of barriers and specific strategies for overcoming them.)

Once both the municipal solid waste agency and the unit pricing team or council have evaluated specific goals and barriers, it is time to unveil the program to the city at large. The team or council might consider developing a preliminary proposal with several program options. This proposal can serve as a basis for public discussion and help illustrate what changes might occur.

Building a Public Consensus

Public education is critical to the planning, design, and implementation stages of a unit pricing program. In fact, education is the linchpin holding all of these phases together. While educating the public might at first seem unnecessary and expensive, the experiences of communities that have implemented unit pricing programs indicate that a good public relations program more than pays for itself.



Such a program is effective at developing a general consensus among residents on the need for unit pricing. Community support is vital to the long-term success of a unit pricing program. In fact, communities that have implemented unit pricing programs are nearly unanimous in listing education and community relations as the most important elements of a successful unit pricing program. Public education can combat fears and myths about unit pricing (such as the fear of increased illegal dumping) and help avoid or mitigate many potential implementation problems.

When first reaching out to residents during the planning stage, don't be surprised if many residents react with skepticism to the idea of unit pricing. Initial opposition is often related to a perception that unit pricing will result in an additional financial burden. Opposition also might be due simply to a natural resistance to change. Resistance to unit pricing is especially prevalent in communities where solid waste management fees are hidden in general or property taxes.

To counter this opposition, municipal officials can inform residents of the current difficulties associated with waste collection and management. In particular, officials can explain the costs to residents of the current system of waste management. Next, they could present the goals for improving the management of solid waste in the community. In this context, officials can introduce unit pricing, discuss its potential for meeting these objectives, and address any questions and concerns that residents have expressed about the new program.



In Austin, Texas, solid waste officials included school visits in their public outreach program.

Winning community support for unit pricing often hinges on explaining how the program can achieve certain critical objectives. Discussions at EPA's Unit Pricing Roundtable revealed that residents tended to support unit pricing if the program achieved the waste management principles about which they cared the most. Residents often develop a sense of civic pride in programs that meet these objectives. Roundtable panelists strongly recommended that solid waste officials devote a significant amount of attention to communicating these basic principles:

- **Equity.** The program should be structured so that people who generate more waste pay more, while residents who prevent waste, recycle, and compost are charged less.
- **Waste reduction.** The program must significantly reduce the community's generation of waste, increase the rate of recycling, and, therefore, reduce the amount of waste requiring disposal in landfills and combustors.
- **Reductions in waste management costs.** By helping to alter household waste generation patterns, the program should help reduce the cost of collecting and disposing of the community's solid waste.
- **Municipal improvements.** The program should contribute to improvements in the quality of life in the community, such as resource conservation and land preservation.

In addition to deciding what information needs to be communicated, solid waste officials also should consider how best to reach residents in the community. An unspecified change in waste management services scheduled to occur at some future date is not likely to capture a community's attention. The following activities represent some of the ways in which officials can explain the benefits of unit pricing:

- **Hold public meetings.** Interactive public meetings offer solid waste officials the opportunity to present the case for unit pricing. Such meetings also give citizens the sense that their concerns are being heard and addressed in the eventual program.
- **Prepare briefing papers for elected officials.** As both shapers and followers of public opinion, elected officials tend to be at the center of public policy debates. Because well-informed leadership can raise issues in such a way as to attract residents' interest, solid waste officials might want to provide elected officials with brief summaries of the issues associated with solid waste management and the likely benefits of a unit pricing program.
- **Issue press releases.** Press coverage of a change in the way that a community pays for its solid waste collection services is inevitable. Keeping key radio, television, and newspaper outlets well informed of the reasoning behind the move to unit pricing can make the press a valuable participant in the decision-making process and prepare the community for an upcoming change.

At EPA's Unit Pricing Roundtable, panelists ranked education and community relations as the most important elements of a successful unit pricing program.

- **Work with retailers.** Grocers and other retailers in your community can help educate citizens by displaying posters and other information about the new program in their stores. In addition, retailers can help customers generate less waste by displaying information about choosing waste-reduced products.

Part IV of this guide explains additional steps that communities can take to communicate their ideas to the public.

Scheduling Your Planning Activities

Even before the final decision is made to pursue unit pricing, some basic planning issues can be addressed. Chief among these are legal/jurisdictional issues and timing. Generally, states extend to local jurisdictions the authority to provide waste management services and to charge residents accordingly. During the planning process, however, many communities have the unit pricing team research the municipality's legal basis for implementing a new solid waste service pricing mechanism rather than risk discovering a problem unexpectedly during implementation.

Since unit pricing programs often involve a number of steps and some complex decision-making, consider developing a timeline for planning, designing, and implementing your program. Based on the experiences of communities that have successfully implemented unit pricing, planning for unit pricing should begin at least a year in advance of your targeted start date. You can establish goals for the unit pricing program and begin explaining the program to the community from 9 to 12 months before program implementation. Public education should continue throughout the months prior to the program and, to some extent, after the program is underway. You can identify the legal framework for the program at least six months before the start of a program. A detailed suggested timeline for a unit pricing program is provided in Part IV of this guide.

questions & answers



Everyone agrees we should prevent waste and recycle more. Why do we need to spend so much time thinking about specific goals and objectives?

It will probably be easy to get a broad consensus that some things are “good,” such as saving money or reducing disposal rates. But solid waste management in general and unit pricing in particular often involve a series of tradeoffs. For example, a community may decide to sacrifice some convenience for households to cut costs or to create a stronger waste-reduction incentive. Establishing goals and priorities early in the planning process can make it easier to make difficult choices as they arise.

Why is public input so important? We have already consulted with many solid waste experts, who know a lot more about solid waste issues than residents.

Municipal officials and experts agree—no unit pricing program is going to work if local residents oppose it. Since improved solid waste management requires a good faith effort from residents to reduce the amount of waste they dispose of, it makes sense to include residents as equal partners.

Points to remember



Establish **realistic goals** for your unit pricing program that address your community's most pressing waste management needs.



Involve the community in the planning process. Representatives from community organizations can increase acceptance of unit pricing and facilitate implementation.



Plan for the possibility of illegal dumping or burning. In addition to explaining other communities' experiences with illegal dumping, let residents know about legal alternatives for managing and disposing of solid waste. Also explain that **concrete steps**, such as assessing penalties for violators, will be taken.



Public education cannot be stressed enough. Promoting the strengths of unit pricing and addressing residents' concerns is **critical** to the success of your program.



Provide elected officials with information on the benefits of unit pricing programs to help them address residents' concerns. Also, **keep local officials informed** of decisions made about the program as it evolves.



Be sure to **carefully research** your legal authority to establish and enforce a unit pricing program. Based on this research and on the advice of your municipality's legal counsel, ordinances may be necessary to establish the program.



Plan ahead by establishing a timeline for your program.

Case Studies

Three Cities Report on Illegal Dumping

In **Mansfield, Connecticut**, officials report that illegal dumping did not increase significantly with the introduction of unit pricing. To prevent illegal dumping, Mansfield has relied primarily on public education. When necessary, however, the solid waste department also has worked with the police department to track license plates and identify violators.



In **Seattle, Washington**, unit pricing also has not been associated with an increase in illegal dumping. In fact, 60 to 80 percent of the illegal dumping incidents in the city are associated with remodeling waste, refrigerators, and construction debris—waste that the city suspects comes from small contractors who do hauling on the side and dump the refuse. Seattle officials are considering licensing these haulers or requiring remodelers to verify that their material has been properly disposed of.



The city of **Pasadena, California**, reports similar findings. A survey done at the city's landfill indicated that Pasadena was disposing of one-third more trash than was indicated in a waste generation study completed in the city. Pasadena suspects that this waste is made up of construction and demolition debris dropped off by small contractors. In the future, instead of contracting with small individual haulers, Pasadena may require those applying for a building permit to use licensed haulers to take construction and demolition materials to the landfill.

