

Article published Sep 14, 2007

## **To promote recycling, let's consider 'Pay as you throw'**

By Bill Berlow  
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Now that our household is down to just two, the amount of garbage that Michele and I produce is negligible.

Between the organic material that we put in our backyard compost and recyclables such as aluminum cans, plastic and white paper products, very little winds up in our trash container.

It would take us a month, maybe more, to fill it. I usually take the container down to the curb for our once-a-week pickup by Waste Management (we live in the unincorporated area), but that's out of habit more than necessity.

Yet we pay exactly the same rate for garbage service as if we recycled absolutely nothing, didn't bother composting, and had bags of trash overflowing the container and spilling onto the road every week.

Hardly encouragement to minimize our impact on the Leon County landfill.

I'd rather pay as we throw. If our volume of trash is lower by two-thirds than what someone else produces, shouldn't our bill be lower by two-thirds?

It would be great, of course, if more people were environmentally conscious, with no expectation of getting anything in return other than knowing they've been good to the earth.

That might happen on a co-op where there's a collective "green" consciousness. But it's not realistic to expect large numbers of people to change their trash and recycling habits unless there's a payoff - literally.

"Pay as you throw" - or variable-rate pricing - treats garbage collection much like an electric bill: Customers are charged only for what they use, or in this case, what they throw away.

So, just as someone might be motivated to install more insulation in her home to reduce the amount of electricity she uses and pays for, she'd have more of an incentive to recycle and compost more to create less waste *and* save money.

It's hardly a unique idea: Almost 7,100 communities across the country do just that, according to a report last year for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Those "pay as you throw" (PAYT) programs nationwide resulted in the diversion of an estimated 6.5 million tons of municipal solid waste per year that otherwise would have wound up in landfills, said the report by Skumatz Economic Research Associates Inc. of Colorado.

Why aren't Tallahassee and Leon County governments, both of which pride themselves on being green, on board?

About six years ago, Alachua County was asked the same question - not by staff members, but by citizens. The result: Alachua became one of the first communities in Florida to switch to PAYT.

Norm Thomas, Leon County's solid-waste director, was solid-waste chief in Alachua at the time. He's a fan of "pay as you throw."

So is the EPA. The federal agency says that most communities that use variable-rate pricing charge residents a fee for every bag or can of waste. In fewer PAYT communities, residents are billed based on the weight of their trash.

"Either way, these programs are simple and fair," the EPA's Web site says. "The less individuals throw away, the less they pay."

EPA says PAYT programs have three big pluses: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and equity.

Cities that operate PAYT programs, EPA says, have shown major increases in recycling and waste reduction.

"Less waste and more recycling mean that fewer natural resources need to be extracted," EPA says. "In addition, greenhouse gas emissions associated with the manufacture, distribution, use, and subsequent disposal of products are reduced as a result of the increased recycling and waste reduction PAYT encourages. In this way, PAYT helps slow the buildup of greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere, which leads to global climate change."

"Pay as you throw" also helps local governments reduce solid-waste management costs, and gives residents the ability to manage their own bills.

Finally, EPA says, one of the biggest advantages is PAYT's "inherent fairness."

"When the cost of managing trash is hidden in taxes or charged at a flat rate, residents who recycle and prevent waste subsidize their neighbors' wastefulness. Under PAYT, residents pay only for what they throw away."

Leon County Schools just started a major upgrade in its districtwide recycling efforts through a program called iRecycle. Both the city of Tallahassee and Leon County are partners with the school district. (Full disclosure: I'm chairman of the citizen-driven Greenovation project behind the plan.)

We hope that, as more students learn the benefits of recycling, they impart what they've learned to other family members.

If the city and county adopted PAYT programs, it would be an even stronger incentive. Recycle more, pay less.

I'll buy that. How 'bout you?