

Town of Columbia Unit-Based Pricing Program

Unit-based pricing systems in the state of Connecticut aim to encourage waste reduction using financial incentives. The program in Columbia used town-issued bags which were priced by volume.

Population:	5,417
Households Served:	2,081
Services Provided:	Drop-off at town transfer station
Program Duration:	September 2010 – February 2011 (6 months)

Overview

- For Columbia's unit based pricing system, trash disposal at the Transfer Station cost \$0.53 for an 8-gallon bag, \$1.00 for a 14-gallon bag, and \$2.00 for a 33-gallon bag. The revenue generated from the sale of the bags was used to help defray the costs of solid waste disposal (tipping fees).
- The intention was to incentivize residents to recycle more and to achieve greater equity by charging those disposing of a large amount of trash more than those disposing of less. It was anticipated that the unit-based fees would eventually pay for the town's Transfer Station operation costs.
- The unit-based pricing program in Columbia discontinued in February 2011 after being defeated at a town meeting.

History

- The annual cost to the town for Transfer Station was \$123 per household (\$113 for seniors) and was funded mostly through property taxes. An annual Transfer Station permit fee of \$20 (\$10 for seniors) allowing for unlimited trash delivery to the Transfer Station also defrayed some of the costs.
- Households that subscribed to curbside collection services incurred the additional cost of that subscription collection service beyond what they paid in the property taxes. Willimantic Waste Paper Co. and FW Mayo and Sons provide the subscription service to residents that elect curbside collection.
- The unit-based pricing program was recommended by a citizen's Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Commission charged with identifying ways to improve solid waste management and recycling. The Commission recommended the pricing system to the Board of Selectmen (authorized by ordinance to regulate Transfer Station operations).
- The Board of Selectmen held a town meeting to contemplate a pilot program, provided an informational town meeting, and scheduled the pilot to start in September 2010.

Implementation

- The program used three bag sizes: 8-, 14-, and 33- gallon that were bright orange, marked with the Town name, and priced by volume, \$0.53, \$1.00, and \$2.00 per bag, respectively.
- Bags were supplied by Waste Zero, which manufactures and ships bags for a nominal cost. The town paid Waste Zero for the bags and brought them to four retail locations in town--a small food market, a gas station, a package store, and an animal feed and garden store. The retailers sold the bags to the general public in exchange for increased consumer foot traffic. The retailers did not receive any markup from the bags. The town retrieved sales revenue from the retailers.
- The annual permit fee would be lowered to \$1 if unit-based pricing became permanent.

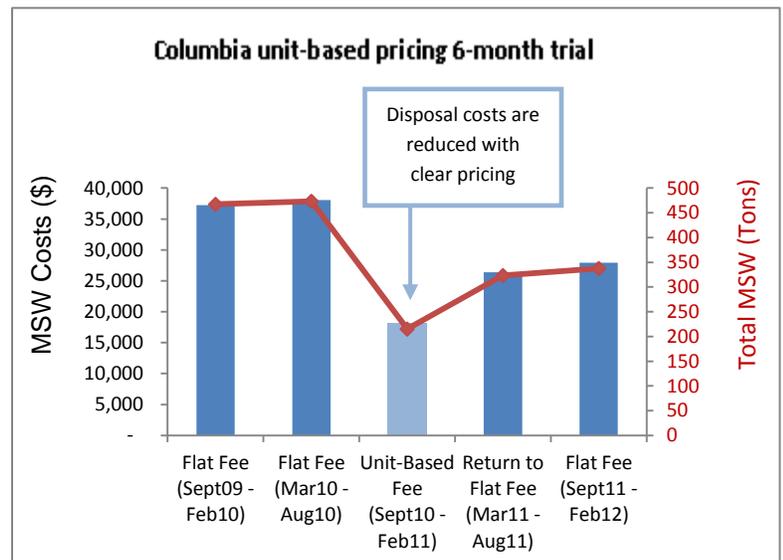
- To enforce the program, the Transfer Station only accepted solid waste in town-issued bags. Transfer station staff monitored users to ensure that no solid waste was placed in the recycling bins.

Additional Waste and Recycling Services

- The transfer station began accepting single-stream recycling (i.e., mixed paper, corrugated cardboard, metals, plastics #1-#7, and glass in one container) in June 2010. No data exists to make conclusions about increased recycling due to single stream or unit-based pricing.
- There is a fee for discarding bulky items and construction debris at the Transfer Station.
- Household Hazardous waste from Columbia is accepted at the MidNEROC facility in Willington.
- Leaves are accepted at a designated composting area of the Transfer Station at no additional cost.
- A Swap Area is available for second-hand items that are in good working order so they may be reused.

Outcome

- The program successfully reduced the output of municipal solid waste by 41% from September to December 2010 as compared to the same time period in 2009 (334 tons to 153 tons). This result is adjusted to account for the 180 households which switched from using the Transfer Station to a commercial curbside program.
- The expected net revenue for the entire trial was \$25,000, but it was exceeded within the first 4 months with actual net revenue of \$28,000.



- Recycling rate increased from 27% to 40%.
- At the conclusion of the 6-month trial, a town meeting was held and the residents voted to discontinue the unit-based pricing program by a majority vote. Many residents opposing the program attended the town meeting and those residents in favor of the program were underrepresented. The question was “called” after a few residents spoke against the pricing system, and therefore some supporters did not speak before the vote was taken.
- Note that Columbia officials believe that some residents that voted in opposition to the unit-based pricing structure were construction contractors that have been illegally disposing of commercial waste at the Transfer Station.
- Citizens felt that they were paying “double taxation” between their property tax and the town-issued bag costs and did not appear to hear or accept the town’s explanation that the property taxes were freed to be used on other community services.
- Town perspective: Towns should practice transparent accounting for solid waste by having users incur direct costs for services as opposed to burying costs in the property tax. In addition, implementing single stream and unit-based-pricing simultaneously may complicate the message to residents and confound the results.
- Kris Earle, Chairman of the Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Commission, and other town officials insist “the only way we will get to a 58% recycling rate is if unit-based pricing is mandatory”.

Contact Information

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