

Brookline Pay-As-You-Throw

Questions and Answers

What is Pay-As-You-Throw (PAYT)?

Pay-As-You-Throw is a system by which you pay for the disposal of your trash. The core idea is that when you recycle more and discard less trash you pay less.

Why are we starting this program?

There are economic, environmental, and equity reasons for going to PAYT. As a community we need to reduce the amount of solid waste we generate to reduce our expenses and to meet state goals.

What is wrong with our current program?

The current program, \$200 per household per year, offers little economic incentive to recycle. Those who dispose of little trash subsidize the practices of those who throw away larger amounts of trash. The fee does not pay the full cost to the Town, so property taxes must subsidize the program.

Why is PAYT better than the system we have now?

The advantages fall into three categories. There is an economic incentive because PAYT rewards trash volume reduction and recycling. There is an environmental incentive because we will reduce the amount of trash being hauled to the incinerator and burned. In Massachusetts, incinerators are among the largest sources of dioxin and mercury emissions. Brookline has committed itself to setting climate change goals. There is an equity incentive because those households producing lower volumes of trash (e.g. senior citizens, single-person households, and careful recyclers) will not be subsidizing households that generate larger volumes of trash.

Whose idea was this PAYT program for Brookline?

The Board of Selectmen, looking for municipal efficiencies and responding to the recommendations of their Solid Waste Advisory Committee, appointed a representative committee to study ways to reduce Brookline's solid waste. The Committee began meeting in July 2008 to research PAYT and other ways of dealing with the problem.

Is PAYT a new idea in Brookline? Massachusetts? The USA?

No. In May 1992, the Brookline Advisory Committee urged the Board of Selectmen and the Solid Waste Advisory Committee to pursue the "pay per bag" or other programs in which the fee would reflect usage. 129 of the 351 Massachusetts cities and towns have gone to PAYT. The United States Environmental Protection Agency estimates that a quarter of United States residents are on some sort of variable-rate program.

A Brookline PAYT Model

How will PAYT work in Brookline?

The trash collection fee for households on municipal service will be reduced to somewhere in a range of \$150 to \$170 per year. That fee will pay for the collection of solid waste, yard waste, and recycling (e.g. personnel, trucks, fuel, administration). Residents will purchase Brookline-approved plastic bags to dispose of their trash. The bag price will cover the costs of disposal.

How much will the bags cost?

The bags will come in two sizes: a 15-gallon model (holds about 12 lbs.) for \$.70 - \$.80 and a 30-gallon model (holds about 25 lbs.) for \$1.40 - \$1.60. They will be sold in 10-packs at several easily accessible retail stores. There is no sales tax on the bags. Stores will not make a profit on the bags.

How were the numbers arrived at?

The municipal solid waste budget for FY 2009 was \$2.8 million. Most of that was covered by the \$200 per household per year refuse disposal fee. The committee broke the costs down, figured out how much of the budget was for collection and operations and how much was for disposal. A \$150 - \$170 yearly fee should cover the costs of personnel, trucks, fuel, recycling and yard waste contracts, and administrative costs for FY 2010. The bag fee should cover the disposal of trash for FY 2010.

Where will the bags be available?

Bags will be available at designated stores throughout town. Hardware stores, convenience stores, and supermarkets are likely outlets. Though stores will not make money on the bags, we expect them to offer the bags both as a public service and to generate foot traffic.

Will residents be able to pay by cash and/or credit cards for the bags?

The stores will be selling the bags as a community service. They can determine how they want to sell them. Some stores might want to insist on cash unless the customer is buying other items at the same time.

Tell me more about the bags.

The bags are manufactured with at least 20% post-consumer recycled plastic content. They are made of 100% LDPE plastic. The bags are available in twist tie or drawstring style and packaged in sleeves of ten. An information insert customized to Brookline and bar-coded is included. They are on the State Contract list.

Finance/Tax Issues

If refuse costs were included in my property tax, wouldn't I be able to claim increased deductions on my federal income taxes?

Having all refuse costs absorbed in the property tax levy would not add to federal tax deductions since homeowners are already being taxed to the Proposition 2½ maximum and hence are eligible for maximum legal deductions right now.

Will residents be able to take a tax deduction on expenses for PAYT bags?

No.

What happens if a homeowner does not pay the yearly fee in a timely manner?

As is done now, unpaid refuse fees are eventually added to the property tax as a lien. It is unlawful to claim this portion of the tax bill as a deduction.

Since all taxpayers pay for schools, police, fire, parks, and public works whether or not they use those services, why shouldn't all taxpayers subsidize trash collection?

Most taxpayers are willing to pay for those governmental functions because they feel that it's in the public interest. Our society benefits, for example, if all children are educated, so public schools are "free" and there is no charge for additional children. Generating more trash is not in the public interest – quite the opposite.

Won't I be paying twice for trash collection and disposal – once through taxes and again through the fee and the bags?

No. If the Committee's recommendation is accepted, the total cost of waste management will be in the fee and the bags.

Isn't the PAYT program just another way around Proposition 2 ½?

No. Most cities and towns in Massachusetts use fees to pay for their solid waste programs: dump fees, annual fees, bag fees, toter fees, etc. The Committee's recommendation is that the pay-as-you-throw municipal solid waste service, just like the Water Division's pay-as-you-flush, must operate as revenue-neutral. The Town must adhere to reasonable expectations of what it will cost to operate the program.

When PAYT starts will I be paying more for trash collection and disposal?

It depends. The annual fee and the bag fee will pay the full cost of the service you use. If you reduce your trash to one small bag a week, you will probably pay less than what you are paying now. Most residents will pay slightly more mainly because trash collection and disposal costs keep going up. Some households will pay more because they generate more waste.

What happens if the PAYT program runs a surplus?

In general, fees cannot exceed the actual cost of service. The Board of Selectmen set the rates based on "reasonable expectations" of revenue. Any surplus must go back into the general fund. In one community, for example, the first year of PAYT cut the disposal costs so dramatically they were able to reduce the annual fee the next year.

Isn't it to my advantage to insist on getting as many free services as possible from the Town?

Town services have never been “free.” You pay for them through the property tax and fees. Each year, Town government decides what services will be provided, the budget reflects the costs of those services, and the taxpayers get the resulting bill. The idea that trash collection and disposal was “free” is an illusion resulting from the fact that it’s simply not spelled out on your tax bill. (Neither, for that matter, is the cost of public safety, schools, parks, etc.) One of the reasons that PAYT works is that it makes clear to everyone that additional trash generation and disposal costs money.

Isn't recycling expensive also?

Yes. Recycling isn't free, but it is less expensive than collecting and disposing of trash. It actually costs the Town about \$156/ton to collect and dispose of trash. Our contract for collecting and hauling recyclables is \$125/ton. We are paid for our waste paper and cardboard at least \$10/ton. At times over the last year that refund climbed to \$125/ton. And added benefit is that recycling doesn't damage the environment the way trash disposal does.

Why don't we eliminate the yearly fee and rely entirely on bag sales for the solid waste budget?

The Committee felt that eliminating the fee entirely would make it very difficult for the Department of Public Works to plan their budget.

Does a change to PAYT require a vote of Town Meeting?

The Board of Selectmen has the right to set solid waste rates. Since PAYT is such a significant change and might require by-law changes it would be best to take the issue before Town Meeting in May 2009. That would give residents time to learn about the system and raise questions and concerns. After a thorough vetting, the representatives can choose to implement PAYT or not.

Can I opt out of municipal collection?

Yes, as long as you can demonstrate to the Town that you have a trash contract with a private hauler.

Other PAYT Communities

How do we know that PAYT will reduce trash volume and increase recycling?

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, and independent research, the average waste reduction reported by PAYT communities is between 25% and 45%. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that pay-as-you-throw is the single best way to reduce solid waste.

Do people in other communities like PAYT?

In every community where PAYT is proposed, there are residents who are certain they won't like the program. But once residents see the program in action, it receives strong support from a majority of people, largely because it's fair and it's environmentally and economically better than standard municipal waste programs.

How do we know that PAYT won't be overly complicated or inconvenient?

Brookline's PAYT program will be easy to understand and use. The mechanism for collecting the annual collection fee is already in place. The specially-marked bags will be easily available. After the program begins, only Brookline PAYT bags will be collected on trash days. Regular collection days will remain the same.

Won't PAYT impose an unfair burden on low-income residents?

Because PAYT restores some measure of individual control over the trash bill, households that need to economize are given the option to do so. The EPA reports that fewer than 10% of PAYT communities offer discounts for low-income residents. Those communities that do discount most commonly certify eligibility by mail and distribute a certain number of reduced-cost bags per year along with other assistance programs.

Why not use barrels with identifying stickers instead of PAYT bags?

Barrels are much more difficult to control and monitor. They come in different sizes. They get overloaded. According to Mass DEP municipal assistance coordinators, PAYT communities with curbside collection have found the bag system is the easiest to implement and regulate. Brookline will still expect that bags left overnight before the collection day be kept in barrels secure from animals and wind.

Doesn't the bag system require a whole different bureaucracy?

No. Brookline would contract with a company whose business is PAYT bags. The company delivers directly to the stores. The company representative checks with the storekeeper to be sure there is plenty of inventory. It is all accounted for. The bag company's costs are figured into the bag price. The storeowner pays the Town. PAYT communities that use this bag system report no significant extra work to manage the bags and the money.

Won't PAYT be unfair to large families?

Large families may face increased disposal costs because smaller families would no longer subsidize their waste disposal. Large families do not generally receive discounts

for their food, water, and other utilities. Under PAYT, all households would have some control over a bill they previously could not lower.

Illegal Dumping

What about illegal dumping?

There is some concern that residents will use public litter barrels to dispose of their waste. Or, in the dark of the night they will leave trash in front of a neighbor's home. Or, they will dump trash in back alleys and commercial dumpsters. The Town takes those concerns seriously. There will be increased enforcement as we institute the program. According to the MassDEP and the research of the committee, communities that went to PAYT did not experience rises in illegal dumping. They reported that concerned owners of commercial dumpsters often began to lock and better manage their dumpsters.

Will there be increased enforcement with PAYT?

Some communities increased enforcement when they changed to PAYT. When Malden switched, the DPW director reassigned himself, his staff, and public health staff for two weeks of intense education and enforcement. He reported that at the end of that period, most households were in compliance.

What about trash scavengers?

In at least one PAYT municipality scavengers have emptied PAYT bags and used them or sold them. The DPW director said it was a minor problem. Scavengers (canners) redeeming bottles and cans – as long as they are not disruptive – reduce our disposal and recycling costs.

What about abuse of public litter barrels?

Malden and Natick vigorously pursued residents who were disposing of household waste in public litter barrels. They also moved some barrels to better-lighted areas. Violations dropped off significantly.

Bulky Waste/Hazardous Items

What about really big items and items that have hazardous materials in them?

We will continue to pick up bulky items at curbside but for a separate fee ranging from \$5 to \$20. Bulky items include furniture, mattresses, carpets, exercise equipment, and white goods (appliances, water heaters, washing machines, etc.). Television sets, refrigerators, and air conditioners contain hazardous waste and we must dispose of them in special facilities. For example, Brookline is currently charged \$14 to drain Freon from air conditioners. Call DPW for prices and directions for paying for special pickups.

What about individual items that don't fit in the PAYT bag but are not big enough to be considered bulky items?

An item that weighs less than 20 lbs. such as a beach chair or floor lamp will be picked up if a small PAYT bag is securely attached to it.

PAYT at the Curb

Will there be any charge for recycling? Yard waste?

No. Since a goal of PAYT is to increase recycling, there will be no additional charge for materials put out for collection by the Town's recycling contractor. There will also be no additional charge for yard waste. Those services will continue to be included in the yearly fee.

What about people who currently use barrels with loose trash instead of bags?

All trash must be in Brookline PAYT bags. You may place the filled PAYT bag in a barrel to protect it from animals and the wind. In fact, if you are putting your trash at curbside overnight it must be secured in a barrel. That rule hasn't changed. The Brookline bag must be easily pulled out of the barrel, or it will not be collected. Trash that is loose in barrels or in a commercial trash bag/liner will not be collected.

Won't residents need more blue bins if they are sorting more recyclables?

Stickers ("commingled containers" and "paper/cardboard") are available from the Town for residents to put on their unused trash barrels. That is probably the most efficient way to accommodate the expected increase in recycling. Extra blue bins will be available for \$5/bin as well. Residents are already encouraged to buy Town-approved totes for recycling.

Aren't people with trash compactors at an advantage with PAYT?

Possibly. A system of weighing trash would be even more equitable but the switchover expenses would be considerable.

Aren't people with in-sink disposers and/or backyard compost bins for food waste at an advantage with PAYT?

Yes. Some estimates put kitchen waste at 30% of curbside trash. Fortunately, the Town sells, at discount, compost bins for backyard composting of fruit, vegetables and yard waste. PAYT may encourage more composting.

Will there be a "grace period" so I can clean out my basement before PAYT starts?

There will be plenty of notification before PAYT starts. The current expectations are that residents contract with private companies for major basement, attic, and apartment cleanouts.

Multi-Unit Buildings

What about multi-unit buildings?

There are 98 buildings with nine units or more that use the municipal solid waste program. Managers report that the rates and services are competitive with private haulers. Though managers and residents might have to make some adjustments, there should be no major reason that multi-unit buildings cannot be on the PAYT program. One

community reported that their PAYT program works so well managers of large buildings and condominium associations want to join the program.

What about multi-unit buildings with trash chutes?

To our knowledge there are no multi-unit buildings on municipal service that use trash chutes.

What about transient residents such as college students?

As always, it will be important for building managers and property owners to inform residents and enforce regulations. An increasing number of college students grow up in PAYT communities and expect to pay per bag.

What about absentee landlords and uncooperative landlords?

The Town will continue to aggressively enforce the statutes. Some towns report that with the PAYT bags it is easier for neighbors and officials to identify those who abuse the system.

Miscellaneous

How does MassDEP calculate Brookline's recycling rates?

DEP calculates recycling rates for all Massachusetts cities and towns on a yearly basis. They take the number of tons of recycling and yard waste; divide that by the total tons of trash, recycling, and yard waste; and multiply the quotient by 100. Brookline's recycling rate has leveled at around 30%.

Will there have to be changes to Town by-laws?

Probably slight changes.

Can PAYT work if the Town decides to privatize waste management?

Yes. PAYT would work if the Town contracts out waste collection. The protocols would be written into the contract.

Can PAYT work with automatic collection?

Yes – with certain adjustments. For really efficient automatic co-collection residents must put their trash and their recycling in separate wheeled carts (toters). The truck must have separate compartments for recycling and trash. Recycling must be single stream (paper and commingled containers in one cart). There would probably have to be adjustments at the transfer station because the loads would have to go in radically different directions – trash to the incinerator, recyclables to the recovery facility.

Because the driver would not be able to tell if there were contaminants in the toter, there would have to be intense enforcement.

If Brookline were to go to automatic collection, the Committee would recommend the following toter sizes: 65-gallon for recycling and 35-gallon for trash.