

City of Fort Collins, CO's Evolving Solid Waste Collection System

Fort Collins (population 145,000) operates under a fully privatized, “open subscription” trash collection system. To address citizen interest in creating recycling opportunities, the City began requiring trash haulers to provide curbside recycling in 1992 as a condition of their municipal trash hauling license. The City next amended the license in 1995 to require all residential haulers to apply variable, or Pay-as-you-throw, rates.

The purpose of the volume-based rates is two-fold: they are more equitable since individual households generate widely varying amounts of weekly wastes; and, volume-based trash rates encourage residents to recycle, conserve resources, and reduce wastes. The PAYT ordinance continues to be the City’s most important tool for achieving community goals for recycling, waste diversion, and greenhouse gas emissions reductions. Fort Collins has passed amendments several more times over the years to strengthen the effectiveness of the Pay-as-you-throw Ordinance.

PAYT Ordinance

Fort Collins’ Solid Waste Collection and Recycling Services Ordinance (Article XV, Section 15 of the Municipal Code, which can be found on the City’s website at <http://fcgov.com/recycling/ordinances.php>), requires all residential trash haulers to:

- Charge for trash collection service based upon the weekly trash volumes collected from customers who live in single-family residents or apartment complexes of ≤ 8 units
 - Each additional 33-gal. unit of trash must cost the same amount as the rate set (individually by haulers) for the first 33-gal. unit
 - Homeowner Association contracts must also receive PAYT rates
- Offer weekly curbside recycling as part of their basic trash collection service at no additional charge to residential customers
 - The list of materials that must be collected is updated yearly by the City Manager
 - Haulers who provide customers with large wheeled carts (65- or 95-gal. capacity) may schedule every-other-week collection for recycling
- Provide biannual reporting to the City on volumes of trash and recycling collected, number of customers who participate in curbside recycling, and levels of trash service to which customers subscribe
- Distribute educational information at least yearly to their customers about trash service levels options and recycling services
- Provide access to their record-keeping by City auditors to verify compliance.

As of 2009, trash haulers may not charge a flat monthly fee, on top of the volume charges, with the exception of ultra-low-generating trash customers who choose to buy pre-paid rolls of trash bags. Fort Collins haulers can employ a variety of volume-based rate systems, including prepaid bags or tags, or the more typical volume subscription system, i.e., a one-can (~33-35 gal.) per week, two-can (65-gal.), or three-can (95 gal.) per week service. When a household exceeds its maximum service level, the hauler must charge for excess waste that is set out for collection. Failure to charge for excess waste, or for violating any other element of the PAYT ordinance, could cause a hauling company to lose its municipal hauling license.

Results

In the mid-90s, Fort Collins' waste diversion level was around 17%. After the PAYT ordinance was passed, the diversion rate quickly surpassed original goals of diverting 20%. Customers' participation in curbside recycling has consistently ranged between 85-95%.

In 1999, the City adopted a goal to divert 50% of the entire community's waste stream (including commercial sources) from landfill disposal by 2010. For 2010 the diversion rate for the City was calculated to be 43%. Recommendations for reaching the 50% goal continue to be discussed in the community, and are also being evaluated as part of new strategies to help the City achieve its Climate Action Plan goals.

Fort Collins Trash Districting Pilot

In 2008 the City undertook a study to examine ways to increase trash and recycling collection efficiency while simultaneously reducing the impacts of trash collection on city streets, neighborhood safety, and noise. The study concluded that trash districts, or assigning certain areas of the city to certain haulers through a competitive bid process (a scheme that is very common in other parts of the United States), had the potential to reduce wear and tear on streets, minimize noise and safety impacts, reduce overall truck emissions, and save money for citizens in the city. The full study can be accessed on the City website:

http://www.fcgov.com/trashstudy/pdf/trash_svcs_study_final_2008-0701.pdf .

In 2009 the City Council directed staff to investigate starting a pilot program in one quadrant of the city to determine the effectiveness and feasibility of trash districts city-wide. Fort Collins went through a competitive bid process and entered into negotiations with a company to provide services for the trash district pilot area. It was determined that the service levels would remain similar to the existing service levels for all households in the pilot area with significant cost savings for the majority of the rate payers under the districting plan. However, under the pilot district, residents would no longer be able to choose which hauler they use, since all households would be required to use the contracted hauler. Following a considerable amount of public input and debate in the Fort Collins community, the City Council voted not to initiate the pilot project and to discontinue further discussions about consolidating trash services under City-managed contracts.

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