

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

Mount Vernon, Iowa

Population: 3,700

Type of Community: Suburban

Type of Program: Tags

Program Start Date: July 1991

Paying for one's waste has brought home to each of us a growing awareness of the full lifecycle costs of "throwing it out."

Getting Started: Why Pay-As-You-Throw?

Mount Vernon is a small, attractive college community in eastern Iowa, home to professional commuters as well as college staff. The city's income level ranks above average for the state. In July 1991, the city began to charge directly for the collection of residential trash, bulky items, grass clippings, and garden waste. At the same time, bins were distributed to begin curbside collection of materials for recycling. We expected these two steps to work together. Charging for each container of trash provided the financial incentive to move material from trash containers into recycling bins—the city would then contract to collect this recycling material free of direct charge.

pounds, and multiple tags for bulky items. Homeowners also receive a \$7 solid waste bill monthly. The city discounts the monthly fee for households defined as low income under the school lunch program.

While the revenue from tag sales roughly covers the cost of trash collection and landfill fees, the monthly billing finances the "free of charge" collection of recycling material, leaves, and brush. Residents say tags are a fair way to pay for trash disposal, and the combination of tags and monthly fees provides a steady revenue to the city.

Why Tags?

The city council appointed the Reduction and Recycling Committee to develop a solid

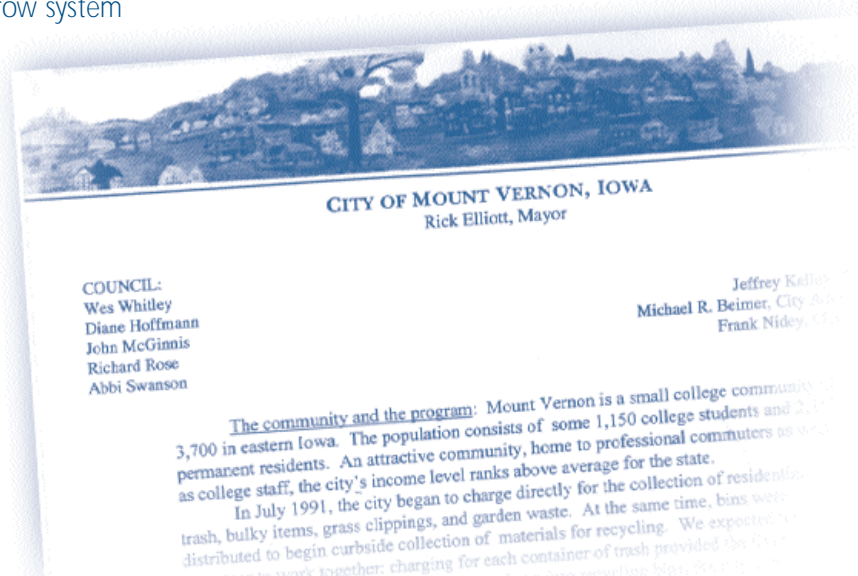
"We have not only reduced the amount of trash sent to the landfill, but also generated an enormous amount of civic pride in our efforts to do something positive for our community environment."

—Rick Elliot, Mayor

How Does It Work?

The city's pay-as-you-throw system works quite simply.

Households purchase \$1.75 tags at city hall or one of several stores. As a public service, stores sell the tags with no markup. The price for collection is one tag for each container, which must be no more than 30 gallons or 40





waste program. We spent over a year researching the experiences of other communities and consulting experts, and eventually recommended tags for waste collection to accompany curbside recycling. Tags cost little to print, permit residences to continue using their containers within the volume and weight limits, adhere securely at all temperatures, are convenient for participating merchants to handle, and can easily be removed when the trash is collected. Stealing of tags has not been a problem in this residential community.

Success: Increased Waste Reduction and Recycling

Pay-as-you-throw played a major role in motivating waste reduction and nearly doubling recycling. The city estimates that the trash the typical resident sent to the landfill decreased by nearly 40 percent, from 45 pounds per week in 1990 to 27 pounds in 1995. In addition, requiring a tag for each container of grass clippings and garden waste has nearly eliminated the collection of these materials. The total reduction of residential trash and all yard waste per household exceeds the goal of 50 percent waste reduction the state legislature has established for the year 2000. Dumping, subject to a \$1000 fine in Mount Vernon, has not been a problem.

Altogether, by recycling and reducing trash, and by leaving grass cuttings on the lawn or composting it, the average household saved \$47 last year in fewer tags purchased, a total saving of some \$46,000 for our 980 households. At 9 pounds per household per week, Mount Vernon leads all 17 cities in Linn County in recycling.

In addition to putting more into recycling bins, residents of Mount Vernon

have reduced waste in various ways: 1) recycling appliances; 2) recycling materials the city does not accept at drop-off facilities in Cedar Rapids and places of employment that recycle these items; 3) backyard composting of organic wastes; 4) purchase of reuseable rather than disposable materials; and 5) more yard sales. Much of this additional recycling and reduction is doubtless motivated by the tags that residents must purchase to send trash to the landfill. We believe that such incentives would also work with less expensive drop-off recycling programs in other cities.

As Mount Vernon's mayor, Rick Elliot, says: "Our program has been very successful due to the initial involvement of a large number of citizens, continued expansion of recycling opportunities, community education and ownership of the program, and a very civic-minded, cooperative recycling and refuse vendor. This program works and it works well."

How Mount Vernon's Program Could Be Even Better

The major challenge inherent in any reduction and recycling program is informing the public. The city needs to do better at keeping households current on changes in the recycling program. One successful example is an information packet prepared by the Recycling and Reduction Committee that explained to households how, with reasonably frequent mowing, grass cuttings left to decompose produce a healthier lawn. Informing households about alternative ways to deal with wastes goes hand in hand with pay-as-you-throw to maximize the effectiveness of the financial and environmental incentives.

Mount Vernon's success story was compiled by Don Cell, Chair of the Reduction and Recycling Committee. For more information on Mount Vernon's pay-as-you-throw program, call Bluestem Solid Waste Agency at (319) 398-1278.