

User Fees for Solid Waste Management in Rhode
Island

by

Douglas Eric Barrett
B.A., Cornell University, 1986

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in the Program in Environmental Studies at Brown
University

May 1991

Abstract

Due to increasing operating costs and declining revenues, the Rhode Island solid waste management system is in danger of financial collapse. Swift and decisive action is needed to prevent the failure of the system; both the mandated system configuration and present funding mechanisms urgently need to be reexamined. With the State struggling to reduce its budget deficit and local property taxes already overburdened, the most effective way to achieve stability for the solid waste system is for generators to pay directly the true costs of managing waste. In addition, to meet the maximization criteria established by the General Assembly, the institutional structure of solid waste management should support reduction and recycling priorities, enabling a disposal facility configuration smaller than currently planned. A user fee, or variable rate, system for solid waste management would achieve these goals.

The user fee system recommended for residential solid waste in Rhode Island is a volume-based "bag and tag" system. This system would be implemented on a statewide level by the Rhode Island Solid Waste Management Corporation, but local governments would maintain responsibility for collection and hauling, and ultimately, for payment of unfunded disposal costs. Potential obstacles to successful implementation of the system include enforcing compliance, illegal dumping, counterfeiting, low-income assistance, and multi-unit housing. Even if these potential problems can be overcome, as they have in other jurisdictions with user fee systems, the greatest hurdle facing the Rhode Island system is gaining political and public acceptance for the concept.