

Pay-As-You-Throw Programs Help Climate Change Challenge

By Ana Arias

“Pay-As-You-Throw aligns economic and environmental priorities in the same direction, so that they work to support each other instead of being at odds.”

--Richard Denison, Senior Scientist, Environmental Defense

Over the last nine months, we've heard and read much about the City's most recent amendments to its Pay-As-You-Throw (PAYT) system (see <http://fcgov.com/recycling>). Let's take the lens of the PAYT discussion and focus it at the 30,000-foot view to see how PAYT programs can have a positive effect on climate change.

PAYT systems are intended to create incentives for residents to reduce the amount of trash we generate and to recycle more. No matter how we slice it, solid waste represents a cost to us beyond money. It's not just about generating less refuse; it's also about the impact it has on climate change. We need to remember that the creation, delivery and disposal of new products contribute to the formation of greenhouse gases (GHG) and thereby contribute to climate change.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), when we reduce, reuse and recycle products, we directly lower the GHG emissions associated with that entire widget production, distribution and throwing away process. So when we buy in bulk, for example, we're using less packaging. This translates to reduced energy needs for manufacturing. It also represents less waste that would otherwise create methane emissions in the landfill. If the widget is a re-used paper product, it would represent more trees standing in the literal forest that can absorb GHG gases from the atmosphere.

In partnership with Duke University, the EPA conducted a comprehensive study to help quantify the climate change benefits of waste reduction programs such as PAYT. According to their estimates, for each resident that participates in a PAYT program, the yearly emissions of GHG are reduced by an average of 0.085 metric tons of carbon equivalent (MTCE). MTCE is the basic unit for GHG.

In a nutshell, this means that a city of 100,000 residents has the potential of reducing yearly GHG emissions by 8,500 MTCE by implementing a PAYT program. The assumption here is that the mix of recyclables is representative of the most common types of recyclable materials (e.g., aluminum cans, steel, newspapers and plastic bottles).

If jointly we embrace the notion of putting out more recyclables at curbside while generating less trash, we'll benefit as a community. We'd be choosing to manage our solid waste in environmentally and economically sustainable ways.