

EQUITY IN SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL:

APPLYING BAG AND TAG IN RHODE ISLAND

BY

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ABSTRACT

Bag and tag programs, also known as "pay-per-bag," and "pay-as-you-throw," charge each resident for the costs of their solid waste disposal based on the volume of their garbage. These user charges replace costs that have previously been "hidden" in property taxes, making residents aware of the amount of waste that their household produces per week. The goal of the programs is source reduction: shrinking the amount of municipal solid waste being landfilled while simultaneously promoting recycling. A number of programs across the United States have successfully reached these goals through implementing a bag and tag system. In 1991, the state of Rhode Island proposed its own comprehensive, statewide system. The bill did not pass, and the state's research on the feasibility of bag and tag systems for Rhode Island essentially halted. The concept of a user-fee based system has not died, however. Two municipalities within the state, South Kingstown and Westerly, are currently considering pay-per-bag systems as a means to cover management costs of recycling, landfill closure, and administration of their solid waste disposal.

Because pay-per-bag programs have been implemented on a town by town basis, they can be viewed as very site-specific, and may be suitable only for certain types of communities. The appropriateness of the user fee policy, therefore, has to be examined at the municipal level. As the municipalities involved with the program are introducing a "new" fee for disposal services that were previously offered at no visible charge, equity considerations must be taken into account. Imposing one rate for garbage disposal is potentially regressive: people with a lower income will pay a larger percentage of their income in disposal costs than those households with a higher income. Bag and tag

programs target purchasing patterns that the state views as wasteful, but these behaviors reflect the only option for some portions of the population have, due to cultural and financial reasons. Garbage research in the Midwest and Southwest suggest that lower-income, minority families tend to buy smaller products with higher packaging-to-product ratios than do wealthier families. In Rhode Island, with its 87% white population, there is a great potential that the small, ethnic sectors of the population will bear a larger share of the costs brought about by bag and tag fees. Examining the demographics and potential effects on income that a bag and tag program would have on two Rhode Island municipalities will help illustrate whether bag and tag principles can operate effectively and fairly in Rhode Island's system of municipal solid waste management. As some jurisdictions in Rhode Island are on the verge of implementing bag and tag, the time is right to consider what motivates the purchasing patterns that volume-based fees seek to regulate.