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Residential Garbage Fees Vital to Achieving NYC's Environmental Goals and Lowering Costs

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By Carol Kellermann

Landfilled trash managed by New York City's Department of Sanitation costs \$300 million each year and produces more than 1 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions. That's the equivalent of burning 13,500 tanker trucks of gasoline. The high expense and environmental impact result from the City's low residential diversion rate and high reliance on private and municipal landfills in faraway locations.

Mayor de Blasio has set ambitious goals to double waste diversion by 2020 and reduce greenhouse gas emissions 80 percent by 2050. The City also aims to divert organic waste from landfills in favor of composting and energy conversion. Meeting these worthy goals will be challenging. A key step would be the implementation of a variable fee for residential trash removal to provide an economic incentive to reduce non-recyclable and non-compostable waste.

All other large U.S. cities, except for Boston and Chicago, charge at least some fees associated with residential garbage collection and disposal. These fees offer four main benefits.

First, residents would bear costs more directly than if they are incorporated into the overall City budget. This would provide a strong incentive to reduce the volume of waste they discard.

Second, less trash would go to landfills. Among large and dense U.S. cities, ones with the highest residential diversion rates - San Francisco, San Jose, and Seattle - use a monthly fee structure that varies based on the volume of trash set out.

Third, the City would gain a new revenue stream to support disposal infrastructure, such as plants to convert organic material into gas or fuel. Investment in new disposal infrastructure in New York City would reduce dependence on other municipalities, stabilize long-term costs, and reduce long hauls from the city.

Finally, by aligning fees with usage - the more trash you generate, the more you pay - the financing structure would be more equitable. Residents who take the time to reduce waste destined for landfill would not have to pay as much as those who do not.

Opponents of residential trash fees raise certain administrative challenges - illegal dumping, dealing with large apartment buildings, and the possibility of a new tax. However, experience from other large dense cities - including Toronto, Seoul, Berlin, and Zurich - points to ways that New York City can successfully minimize these problems.

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For example, bag or sticker programs could be used for large apartment buildings, and rebates could offset the new fees. Another approach would be to allocate a certain number of garbage bags or tags, and residents who need less could sell the bags while residents who need more would pay extra.

City officials should craft a plan for phased implementation of garbage fees before moving to wider expansion. A good way to start is with a voluntary pilot program. The fees could initially be pegged to the cost of disposal, which is about \$7 per month for the average New York City household.

A more detailed analysis of New York City's residential garbage collection and how garbage fees are employed in other cities is contained in a new report by the Citizens Budget Commission - "A Better Way to Pay for Solid Waste Management". Under the current system, New York City taxpayers spend \$1.5 billion annually, or about \$500 per household, to pick up residential and public trash.

New York City's solid waste management practices call out for reform. Addressing the environmental and fiscal costs of garbage will require a bold redesign - one that should begin with how residents pay for trash disposal.