

The Metro Section

TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 2002

The New York Times

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The Big City

Try Ending Free Pickup Of Trash

THE mayor wants to save New Yorkers money by suspending the city's costly program of recycling bottles and cans. The City Council wants to spend more to expand it. These agendas are not easy to reconcile.

But there is another way for New York to save money and still accommodate those citizens with a passion for sorting trash. This approach could also inspire some non-believers to start conserving resources — and there wouldn't even need to be recycling police out fining those who dared toss a juice bottle in the regular trash.

To inaugurate this kinder, gentler, cheaper era of recycling, all the city has to do is stop providing free garbage collection. That's not a popular proposal for any politician to make, but then, neither are the various new taxes being proposed by the Council.

A pay-as-you-throw program could start off just with houses, not apartment buildings. That way, besides avoiding the complications of a large building, you begin to address a fundamental inequity in the city's tax system. Houses for one, two or three families are taxed at only one-fifth the rate of apartment buildings and commercial property.

"The city shouldn't be giving preferential tax treatment to one type of property over another," said Diana Fortuna, the president of the Citizens Budget Commission, a private group that analyzes city finances. "We should be trying to equalize the rates instead of playing favorites."

Adding a garbage-disposal fee to the property tax bill would be a step toward equalizing rates, particularly if the revenue were offset by giving tax reductions to apartment dwellers and commercial property owners. The annual fee could vary depending on how much trash the homeowner generated.

The city isn't now equipped to bill homeowners by the bag or by the pound, but other cities are already running pay-as-you-throw programs. And there's no reason that the program would have to be run by the city. Private carters already handle the trash from restaurants and other businesses in the city, and they could presumably save New Yorkers money if they were al-

New Yorkers might not be so wasteful if it cost a little more.

lowed to compete for business.

The city could gradually allow homeowners to opt out of the city program by demonstrating that they had contracts with licensed private carters. The annual cost for hiring a private hauler might range from \$100 to \$400 for a home in New York, according to Richard Fuller, the president of Great Forest Inc a waste-management consulting firm whose clients include the owners of commercial and residential buildings in New York.

Once New Yorkers started paying to get rid of trash they produced, they would produce less of it. "If you charged them by volume," Mr. Fuller said, "you'd see an enormous number of people buying trash compactors." People would also make more efforts to get their names off junk-mail lists; they might not renew some subscriptions to newspapers and magazines; they would think twice about some of the packaging they bought at the store.

"You might see a 10-percent reduction in the amount of trash," said J. Winston Porter, a former official at the federal Environmental Protection Agency who is now the president of the Waste Policy Center, a consulting organization. "People become more careful once they realize that garbage collection really isn't free."

THE rate of recycling would certainly go up if the city went on collecting recyclables at no charge, which would be one way to get environmentalists behind the pay-as-you-throw program. But that would still leave the city with hefty bills for a program of dubious value.

The surest way to create a sustainable recycling program would be to take it out of the hands of the politicians who have made such a mess of it. They've inflated costs with redundant systems — the curbside pickup system plus the separate redemption of cans at stores — and by requiring New Yorkers to recycle glass, plastics and other materials that aren't worth much and often end up in landfills anyway.

If private haulers were picking up the recyclables as well as the trash, they'd be guided by market prices, not arbitrary rules. They'd encourage people to recycle the valuable stuff, like aluminum cans and some kinds of paper, and not waste their customers' time and money sorting worthless trash.

New Yorkers would be recycling not because it was the law but because they wanted to save money. The recycling program wouldn't be endangered the way it is today because it wouldn't be dependent on the whims of politicians.