FINAL REPORT OF THE WESTFORD BUDGET TASK FORCE

OCTOBER 18, 2023

- Franklin and Westborough were interviewed. Each said that the Fire Chief placed a priority on Ambulance revenue. They prioritized paperwork and policies to make sure they were collecting the maximum possible, and they go out to bid every 3 years for billing paying less (% basis), and they have a 98% collection rate. Westford's last few years of collection rates: FY21 - 91%; FY22 - 87%; FY23 (so far) - 82%.

Trash and Recycling

- In FY25, the per capita cost of trash and recycling services will be $105. The average per capita cost among the comparable towns is $74.
- 14 of the 22 communities have limits on trash (64 gallons or less) and/or charge residents a fee. Concord and Shrewsbury residents pay for all of the trash they put out at the curb, resulting in $0 cost to the budget for Concord, and 50% reduction for Shrewsbury
- 4 of the 22 communities have a transfer station which costs significantly less to run. Annual fees to use the transfer station are charged to the residents resulting in zero (Acton and Sudbury) to little ($26 per resident for Westborough) cost in the budget.
- In 2021, Westford residents disposed of 0.95 tons of trash per household per year on average. This is 17.8% higher than the average of all Massachusetts municipalities with curbside collection. For comparison, Concord residents put out an average of 0.69 tons while Shrewsbury residents' average was 0.63 tons. Towns pay additional fees per ton of trash taken to the incinerator.
- Several communities have composting options to reduce solid waste. Concord initiated a pilot program, Chelmsford recently negotiated with private company (Black Earth Composting) to provide better rates to their residents. Lexington has a compost facility.
- If Westford were to reduce their trash tonnage to the average, this could save approximately $135K.

Health Insurance

Employee health insurance was very difficult to benchmark. It depends on the number of employees participating in the plan, the health of the employees, the financial model of the plan, and whether or not the Town participates in a group plan. For these reasons, charts comparing costs are not helpful. However, the BTF did make some observations.

- Several communities offer their employees high deductible plans.
- Westborough created rules around eligibility for their PPO plan.
- Several communities participate in group plans including the Group Insurance Commission (GIC) through the state or collectives with other towns. Examples include Bedford, Franklin, Lexington, North Andover, Reading, Shrewsbury, Stoneham, Sudbury, Wellesley, and Westwood. These tend to be favorable in terms of costs.
- Reading and Franklin mentioned the involvement of their Insurance Advisory Committee was instrumental in controlling health insurance costs.

Other Benchmarking Observations

- Most communities have all /many vehicles refueled at a DPW or group facility at wholesale rates.
- Many communities have a "Vehicles Maintenance" department with the DPW that maintains all town vehicles. Exceptions are specialized Fire apparatus. This also ensures vehicles are

The schools should look at potentially increasing the school rental fees and also initiate school level campaigns to advertise the usage of school space, via principal updates or the WPS Bulletin.

Composting Program

Description

According to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, 25% of all waste disposed of in the Commonwealth (post recycling) is food waste and could be diverted from the waste stream through composting. In Westford that would generate a reduction in waste disposal (tipping fees) of between $150,000 and $200,000.

History

Westford does not have a formalized composting program, but there are several resources for the residents of Westford to get more information. There is a section on the town website dedicated to composting. The Recycling Commission facilitates the purchase of discounted composting bins.

Revenue Impact

If more residents were participating in composting, there would be less trash waste to be picked up through the trash pick-up. This would in turn reduce some of the cost that Westford is paying to dispose of trash. However, how much the impact would be is hard to quantify as it is dependent on resident participation and the reduced quantity would be difficult to guesstimate.

Chelmsford just recently signed an agreement with Black Earth Compost to deliver a resident curbside organics program. The curbside service can be weekly or bi-weekly pickup. The resident does pay for the program at $19.16/mo for weekly pickup and $14.99 for bi-weekly pickup. The Chelmsford DPW will be providing a compost starter kit to residents that includes either a 4- or 13-gallon bucket. If there are enough subscribers, the subscription price will reduce. This type of service availability may assist Westford resident's in reducing their waste.

Process to Implement

Increasing composting is mostly about increased education to the community and having residents participate.

Community Impact (Positive and/or Negative)

Composting does put more responsibility on the residents as they will have to change how they are disposing of their trash to be more purposeful about composting. However, reducing waste is beneficial to the environment as a whole so the upside is impactful.

Recommendation

The Select Board can work with the Recycling Commission to promote composting as a dual win - both a reduction in waste that is collected and incinerated and a reduction in waste disposal expense. Because this will require education and broad participation, this cannot be counted on for a near-term budget reduction. The Recycling Commission and/or Select Board could work with a local curbside compost pickup company to negotiate a reduced rate for residents like Chelmsford recently did. These types of programs can accept a wider array of food waste and eliminate the ick-factor that a lot of people have toward backyard composting.

Pay As You Throw Trash Fees

Description

A "pay as you throw" or "pay as you use" trash system is a waste collection strategy in which the residents pay for some or for all of their trash waste expense. This has been a practice in other communities in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for over 20 years. This type of strategy helps towns better manage solid waste in a more cost-effective manner by working with residents to increase recycling and composting, while reducing waste. Westford residents generate 17.8% more solid waste than the Commonwealth average for towns with curbside pick up.

History

The Town of Westford has used ACME Waste Systems for many years to collect Westford's trash. Westford's contract with ACME is coming to an end and they are not planning to re-bid. Westford is currently sourcing for a new waste collection vendor as described above.

Revenue Impact

Other communities charge for the trash bags approved for collection, and the accumulated revenue from these bags transfer part or all of waste collection expense to residents. Concord has a full pay as you through system – residents pay for special bags that will be collected and bear most or all of the total collection expense. If Westford were to implement a similar system or an annual permit system for approved totes, up to the full expense ($1,897,784 for FY25) could be removed from our budget and transferred to residents.

Community Impact

Communities who have adopted pay as you throw systems generate less overall waste than communities without this system, which has important sustainability and environmental benefits.

Recommendation

The Select Board has the authority to approve fees related to trash collection and should consider implementing a program that will pass cost increases to residents and provide an incentive for curbside waste reduction.

Ambulance Fees Analysis

Description

Many cities/towns operate their own independent ambulance services. These municipalities have set ambulance fees that are charged to the individual who receives care and/or their insurance company (as appropriate). These fees can create additional revenue for municipalities.

History

Westford has owned and operated its own ambulance fleet since 1947. In 2010, Westford upgraded its services from EMT services (basic life support care such as bandaging, splintering, administering basic medications, etc.) to Advance Life Support care.

Westford did a comparison of our rates vs area towns in 2019 and determined that our rates were in line with the communities that were compared against: Bedford, Andover (raised their rates in 2023), Belmont, Billerica, Burlington, Concord, Lexington, North Reading, Reading, and Wilmington.