

## Town mulls over curbside recycling

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How much would you pay for curbside recycling?

The town of Taos is floating preliminary numbers on what it would cost to offer curbside pickup of unsorted recycling to town residents.

Town officials say the proposal is part of a larger effort to clean up the way it bills for services like solid waste. There's also an effort to find a more equitable way to share the true cost of operating a recycling center in Taos.

Handing over garbage and recycling duties to hauling company Waste Management is one way to make billing more "transparent," said town manager Rick Bellis at a work-study session Nov. 21. But the initial guess at what it might cost might be too much for some residents to swallow.

A ballpark estimate provided to town councilors this week says the curbside recycling service would add about \$14.11 a month to the average household bill. That would be an addition to the current solid waste fee of \$10.53.

"That's a pretty substantial increase," acknowledged Bellis.

The estimate — based on a rough proposal from Waste Management — includes curbside pickup of unsorted recyclables for homes and businesses in the town limits. It also includes the cost to build and operate a transfer facility, as well as the transportation and processing of materials.

Under the deal, the town would provide land for a transfer station. Waste Management would agree to build a recycling transfer station, the cost of which would be paid back through a \$3 fee charged to solid waste customers (included in the \$14.11 estimate).

There are about 2,700 solid waste customers in the town, according to Bellis.

Perhaps the biggest catch in the proposal — the curbside program would not allow glass — which has recently become more expensive to sort, transport and process rather than to simply throw away. Bellis said including glass could be negotiated if the town decided to move ahead with the plan.

The city of Santa Fe offers curbside recycling to residents. Paper, cardboard, aluminum and steel, cartons and plastic are put in one bin. Glass is separated into another bin.

Residential curbside garbage and recycling costs \$15.75 a month for 25,700 Santa Fe customers.

Bellis told *The Taos News* the ballpark figures now being discussed are subject to negotiation and could be reduced. For instance, the town could build its own facility using low-interest loans or grants, reducing the \$3 fee.

Because of the size of the increase, town officials have suggested the issue should go to a referendum, allowing voters to decide if the extra cost is worth the program benefits.

At the moment, town residents pay a 75-cent surcharge meant to offset the cost of recycling operations. However, Bellis said that fee hasn't been increased since 2001.

In addition, the value of recyclable materials has declined significantly, meaning revenue that was once generated by selling recyclables is no longer offsetting costs. All told, Bellis said the town has to spend an additional \$184,000 a year to keep the program afloat.

That expense is born completely by the town, which pays for operating the recycling center. But Taos County and the municipalities that use the regional landfill benefit by having a place to dump recyclables and keep them out of the landfill.

Bellis said the town planned to approach the landfill board to find a different way to pay for the recycling center. One option would be to include the cost in tipping fees at the landfill — meaning anyone who now pays for garbage pickup would share the cost of covering recycling.

According to state figures, all of Taos County recycled 1,869 tons of material in 2015.



**A customer drops off cans at the town recycling center on Bertha Street Nov. 22. The town of Taos is weighing options to covering the cost of recycling. One proposal would be to provide curbside pickup for recyclables, though the preliminary plan would exclude glass and would more than double the average residential customer's bill.**

**J.R. Logan**