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**TOWN OF WARREN**  
OFFICE OF THE TOWN MANAGER

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**MEMORANDUM**

DATE: December 1, 2020  
TO: Town Council  
CC: Anthony DeSisto, Esq.  
FROM: Kate Michaud, Town Manager  
RE: Trash, Recycling and Yard Waste

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The purpose of this memorandum is to outline the existing practices for trash, recycling and yard waste, including the trends and expenses associated with collection and disposal. In addition I am writing to alert you to changes to the tipping fee structure that have been proposed by RI Resource Recovery (the Johnston landfill), which could have significant impacts on the FY22 budget and beyond.

As you know, in November 2019 the Town of Warren switched to a collection bin system, providing one 95-gallon bin for trash and one 95-gallon bin for recycling. Additional recycling containers were available for purchase to those who requested them. Smaller bins were also provided upon request on a first-come, first-served basis. Yard waste is collected curbside at no charge. Yard waste can also be dropped off at the transfer station, with restrictions.

At the beginning of the program, trash tonnage began to trend downward, and recycling rates began to trend upward. February 2020 statistics indicated our most successful month, with lower overall trash tonnage and the highest recycling rate (27%) reported in recent years. However, like in all other municipalities, the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact. The trend of reduced tonnage and improved recycling rates was reversed. This is attributed to an increase in the number of people at home as well as an increase in the use of disposable cleaning supplies and an increase in "take out" containers as restaurants were forced to pivot to a new business model. Another contributing factor was an increase in usage of our outdoor public spaces (and their trash receptacles) including parks and the beach. As an example from elsewhere in the state, the City of Cranston has reported that they have never exceeded their allotted trash cap. This year, they anticipate exceeding the cap by approximately 12%. Yard waste collections also increased as residents spent more time and attention caring for their properties.

## **FEE STRUCTURE**

In an effort to control costs and create fairness in the system, while not overwhelming operations, the fee structure at the Transfer Station was adjusted in July 2020. It should be noted that the per-capita waste produced in the Town of Warren is above the state average<sup>1</sup>. The amount of “free” trash that can be brought to the transfer station (in addition to the weekly curbside collection) was reduced from 1000 lbs. per year per household to 800 lbs. per year per household in order to induce a reduction in per-capita trash production.

In addition, a cap was placed on the volume of yard waste that can be disposed of at the transfer station. Residents can choose to utilize their 800 lbs. for either trash or yard waste. Free weekly curbside pickup of yard waste continues unchanged and grace periods have been allowed immediately following significant windstorms. This practice allows for equal distribution of cost, with all households receiving the same allocation. This also allows for a controlled stream of disposal at the transfer station. Finally, this is a safeguard against bad actors, who may be compensated to dispose of yard waste through a commercial operation and who utilize their Warren residency as an opportunity to maximize profits at the expense of all taxpayers.

Warren is completely unique in the state in allowing for the volume and types of waste that can be disposed at no charge. A survey of RI communities indicates that most limit the amount or type of waste that can be brought to the transfer station, or they limit public access to the transfer station entirely. Many communities have instituted a “pay as you throw” system, eliminating free disposal entirely. Warren is the only community that I could find that allows for any free disposal of trash at the transfer station. A summary of some of these policies is attached for your reference.

## **YARD WASTE**

The Town of Warren maintains an “in house” yard waste composting operation. Town staff tend the piles throughout the composting process and utilize the products on town owned properties. In order to make room on the town’s site, a tub grinder is rented on a per-day basis to grind the material. (The cost to purchase a 12-foot commercial grade tub grinder is estimated at \$300,000-\$375,000.) When the on-site facility reaches capacity, material must be ground up and transported to the Johnston landfill for disposal. It should be noted that while Johnston allows us to dump up to 250 tons of yard waste per year at no cost, there is still expense related to transportation; including labor, fuel, mileage and tolls. There currently is no limit to the volume of yard waste that can be disposed of by residents, for free, with curbside pickup.

## **TRASH**

In November 2020, RI Resource Recovery distributed draft contracts for FY 22 and FY 23, covering the period of July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2023. As a reminder, all cities and towns are required by law to dispose of their trash and recyclables at RI Resource Recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> (2019) Warren = 1,116 pounds / person : Statewide average = 977 pounds / person

In the draft contract, the fees would change as follows:

	CURRENT	FY 2022	FY 2023
UNDER THE CAP	\$47/ton	\$50.50/ton (↑7.5%)	\$54 /ton (↑15%)
OVER THE CAP	\$80/ton	\$90/ton (↑15%)	\$100/ton (↑25%)

*\*% change from current rates*

In FY 20, ending June 30, 2020, Warren disposed of 4,141 tons of trash. Our cap for FY 2020 was 3,144 tons. We exceeded the cap by approximately 24%, representing an excess cost of \$79,760 in tipping fees alone. This is an improvement from FY 19 (1,094 tons / 26.1% over the cap for an excess cost of \$87,520), but not the savings that we were expecting based on the trends in early FY 20. If our trash disposal rates remain constant and the RIRR fee increased are enacted, we can expect a tipping fee increase of \$20,502 in FY 22 (a 9.2% increase) and \$44,948 in FY 23 (a 18.4% increase). When added to the “over the cap” fees, this represents a significant increase in avoidable costs.

I would also like to note that RI Resource Recovery’s calculation of Warren’s cap tonnage is derived from a population projection that was produced by Statewide Planning in 2013. In the current year (FY21), that population estimate is 9,985. This is in contrast to the American Community Survey estimate, which is 10,511. Each “per capita” person is allocated waste per year in the cap calculation, meaning that 526 more residents would allow us more tons of disposal at a lower rate. I do not believe that the lower population projection is accurate, and I hope that the results of the 2020 Census will result in a corrected calculation.

**NEXT STEPS**

Our new accountant, Sean Murphy, has been tasked with performing a full assessment of the costs associated with all aspects of waste management, including collection, disposal, operations and overhead. Once completed, this will allow us to provide a “per ton” cost estimate for each of the major categories of waste (trash, recycling, yard waste). It is likely that this will result in the need for fee adjustments to balance the revenues and expenditures and reduce the burden on property taxpayers. The goal of the town’s waste management system is to reduce trash disposal, increase recycling rates and improve yard waste management. It will be a further challenge to absorb the proposed increases in RI Resource Recovery fees without impacting the overall budget.

With regard to the RI Resource Recovery contract, the following schedule is anticipated:

- December 9: RIRR Board of Directors meeting to approve the new rates
- April 1: Final draft contracts are distributed to municipalities
- June 30: Completed contracts are due back to RIRR

Town Council approval of the final draft contract will be required prior to June 30, 2021.