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Article Published March 5, 2019

Facing Higher Trash Fees, Saybrook Eyes new Ways to Reduce and Recycle

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Carl P. Fortuna, Jr., worries about garbage.

The Old Saybrook first selectman has been following the waste management issues in the state with growing concern. He was alarmed when operations at the primary waste facility for the state screeched to a halt for nearly three months, beginning last November. Now the town is taking a look at ways to reduce the amount of trash it produces.

The facility at South Meadows in Hartford, which burns trash and converts it to energy, is aging and in need of renovation. Its operator, a quasi-public, non-profit entity called MIRA (Materials Innovation and Recycling Authority), has been in negotiations with Sacyr Rooney, a development team chosen in December 2017 by the state Department of Energy & Environmental Protection (DEEP) to renovate the facility, but those talks stalled last September and remain unresolved. And in November, while one of the plant's two turbines was out for repair, the second turbine failed and operations came to a halt.

One of the turbines was returned to service on Jan. 27. Since then, the facility is running at 60 percent capacity, according to Thomas Kirk, MIRA president, and the second one, which has been returned to the plant, was expected to be up and running on March 3.

"I've been talking about it for two years, Fortuna said. "There's a garbage crisis in Connecticut. Twenty [private] haulers and 69 towns use the South Meadows plant. And it's aging out; it's going to be closed. There has to be an alternative at some point.

"The state is not really helping with a solution right now," he continued. "They're going to have to, but in the meantime the town of Old Saybrook has to look at the amount of garbage we produce and try to start lowering the volume and the weight."

During the plant shutdown, MIRA expended approximately \$276,000 each week to ship more than 7,000 tons per week to other states, the [Hartford Courant](#) has reported.

"It was thousands of tons each week at an average cost of about \$100 a ton," said Kirk.

The plant was shut down for one day short of 12 weeks. Using the Courant's figures, which Kirk did not dispute, that's a total cost of more than \$3.3 million, not including the trash that was being diverted to other plants while the first turbine was sent for repair, before the second turbine broke down, causing the "plant casualty," as Kirk called it.

Those funds came from MIRA's reserves; now the entity is seeking to offset those expenditures by raising tipping fees—charge per ton—for municipalities that haul their waste there. Thus, Old Saybrook is facing an increase on April 1 of \$9.35 per ton and an additional \$1.65 per ton effective July 1, for a total increase of \$11 per ton.

For Fortuna, the situation reinforces the need to cut down on waste.

"Ultimately, we're going to pay more, so we want to throw away less," he said.

Old Saybrook's transfer station is open 26 hours a week; currently the booth at the entry point is staffed for only 17 or 18 hours a week, Fortuna said.

"We are going to fully staff the transfer station," he said. "It's in this year's budget—we'll have someone there 26 hours a week. They'll be checking to make sure that everybody who comes in is either doing business in Old Saybrook or an Old Saybrook resident.

"If a contractor comes in, we're going to start asking them.. 'Show me the building permit. Show me where you're working in Old Saybrook.'"

Last July, the Board of Selectmen (BOS) was introduced to the Save Money and Reduce Trash (SMART) program through a presentation by DEEP. The program would introduce official SMART plastic bags for residents to purchase and use to bring their trash to the transfer station. The bags would be on sale at stores around town and the charge for the bags would offset the tipping fees the town pays. According to the DEEP presentation, the bags call residents' attention to the trash they're disposing of, and the nominal charge for the bags creates an incentive for residents to throw away less.

Not everyone uses the transfer station, however.

"A study several years ago estimated that the percentage of people [who bring their trash to the transfer station] is 35 to 40 percent," said Fortuna. "Everybody else has private garbage pickup."

Beach association fees include private trash pickup, Fortuna said. So while those who use the transfer station regularly might object to paying for bags—essentially paying the town to use the transfer station, which they already fund via taxes—those who have private garbage pickup are "subsidizing the transfer station," Fortuna pointed out.

The program, he said, is still on the table.

The Connecticut River Valley Council of Governments (RiverCOG) will be selling composters for \$54.95 at Tractor Supply in Old Saybrook; Fortuna says they're usually sold for \$80 or \$90. Composting is one way to cut down on food waste, which makes up about 20 percent of household waste, he said. The town has posted information about this sale on its website www.oldsaybrookct.gov under the "News" heading. Orders must be placed by Saturday, March 23.

"Even though the recycling market is not great, we need people to throw less into the waste stream," said Fortuna. "We need to make sure that we here are doing our part to reduce. We can reduce the amount we throw away 10 percent to 20 percent. That will be a goal over the next year."