



FIRST EXPERIENCE OF A PAY-AS-YOU-THROW SCHEME IN SPAIN

Ignasi Puig Ventosa
ENT Environment and Management
ipuig@ent-consulting.com

Torrelles de Llobregat is a small town with a population of 4,100, situated in the metropolitan area of Barcelona (Spain). Environmentally sound waste management has always been a priority of the Council; the town was the first in the region of Catalonia to collect biowaste separately.

In 2002 Torrelles de Llobregat had already achieved a significant level of composting and recycling, accounting for some 45% of the total waste generated. However, this level stabilised, which meant that a considerable percentage of the population was not using the selective collection scheme that was implemented, consisting of separate containers for paper, glass, biowaste and non-biowaste plus a recycling centre.

In order to overcome this barrier, the Council decided to implement a door-to-door selective collection scheme, following the steps of other Catalan municipalities that had implemented this system since 2000 with excellent results. In these systems, the different waste materials are collected on different days, with citizens and commercial enterprises leaving their waste at the entrance of their buildings for collection.

However, the main innovation that the Council of Torrelles de Llobregat decided to introduce was a new waste tax. Until 2002, as in the majority of the Spanish municipalities, the waste tax was a flat annual charge, the same for every household. In the case of commercial enterprises the tax was paid according to the type of activity. This tax was deemed unfair since people or activities generating small amounts of waste were actually subsidising higher producers.

To overcome this problem and particularly to foster waste recycling and minimisation, Torrelles de Llobregat decided to implement a pay-as-you-throw scheme, linking the actual payment to the amount and type of wastes generated. This is the first example in Spain of such a scheme and was supported by both the regional Government (Junta de Residus, Generalitat de Catalunya) and the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (Entitat Metropolitana del Medi Ambient).

Since the 14th January 2003, the new collection system and tax have been fully active. Citizens and commercial enterprises leave their waste every night in front of their building for collection. Biowaste and paper/cardboard are collected free of charge, three times and once a week respectively. Glass is the only material still collected in containers, also free of charge. All other waste (mainly packages and refuse) have to be compulsorily left for collection inside special standardised bags provided by the Council. The cost of these bags forms part of the waste tax, and they are distributed through local retailers, with a 40-litre bag costing 0.60 €/u. Bags of larger capacity (100-litres at 1.50 €/u) are available for commercial enterprises. This way, the more



bags being used, the more tax being paid, creating an incentive towards waste reduction and recycling.

In addition to this, large commercial producers of biowaste are charged annually for a bin for this waste fraction for their particular use. The charge depends upon the size and the collection frequency of the bin.

Not surprisingly, three months after the system started, levels of recycling have increased to more than 70%, the quality of the collected materials is very high and some attitudes have changed among consumers. Despite some initial reluctance by some citizens, the use of standardised bags has become the norm. The number of users of the recycling centre has almost tripled, primarily due to the fact that some materials can be disposed of free of charge, if properly sorted, whereas otherwise they would have to be handed to the collection service using standardised bags and consequently paying the waste tax.

During the first year, as a means to smooth the transition to the new system, the Council designed the variable tax to collect 40% of the total cost and 40% by means of a flat tax (similar to the one in place the previous year, but approximately half the value). The other 20% will be paid from the municipal budget as in previous years.

The new tax is fairer, more transparent and capable of fostering waste minimisation and recycling. The new scheme was inspired by collection schemes primarily active in Italy, Belgium and the United States. Schemes of this nature have been running successfully in many towns of these countries and several others for years.

Due to its size and type of urbanisation, the characteristics of Torrelles de Llobregat make it ideal to implement such a scheme. A project like this would require essential adaptations if it was to be implemented in larger compact cities. Nevertheless, in Spain there are literally thousands of municipalities with similar characteristics, and schemes like the one in Torrelles de Llobregat could be implemented with minimal changes. Therefore we are likely to see a spreading of these models throughout Spain, as soon as their benefits become more widely recognized. Hopefully the experience of Torrelles de Llobregat will be a catalyst towards a larger scale movement.