

Frequently Asked Questions:

Save Money and Reduce Trash (SMART)

Overview Questions

1. Q: What is Save Money and Reduce Trash (SMART)?
A: SMART is a system in which we pay for the trash as we dispose of it. SMART allows each household to control its volume of trash and encourages recycling – when we recycle more and discard less trash, we will pay less. SMART has been implemented by more than 147 communities in Massachusetts including Acton, Ayer, Bolton, Groton, Littleton, Northborough, Shirley, Shrewsbury and Worcester.
2. Q: Did the Selectmen vote to adopt SMART?
A: No. The Selectmen voted to appoint a committee to develop a proposal (or proposals) about how to implement SMART in Harvard. There will be a public hearing this spring (date not set) and the Selectmen will vote on the proposal about whether to adopt or not, also later this spring (date not set).
3. Q: Why now?
A: SMART programs have been shown to reduce the amount of trash that we create and to increase recycling. A SMART program gives the residents control over our trash bill.

Questions about the bag

4. Q: What is a “bag”?
A: There are several companies that provide trash bags for SMART programs. Harvard would pick the size(s) we want and the color. Residents would buy the bags at locations in and around Harvard. Only those bags would be allowed to be left at the Transfer Station.
5. Q: How big (small) will the bags be?
A: We don’t know yet. It would make sense to have at least two sizes. For example, the town of Ayer has 15-gallon and 33-gallon bags.
6. Q: Will the SMART bags be strong?
A: Yes. Harvard will contract with a bag supplier and will specify the capacity and weight of the bags. For example, Groton’s 33-gallon SMART bag is 1.5 mil thick. A Hefty® 33-gallon bag is 1.1 mil thick.
7. Q: Will the bags be biodegradable?
A: No, the bags won’t be biodegradable, but they will have recycled content. Also biodegradable bags only make sense when the trash is going to a landfill. Harvard’s trash goes to Covanta where it is incinerated and converted into energy.

Questions about how SMART will work

8. Q: Would there be specific bags to purchase from the town for a fee or would they just charge depending on size of our own bags?
A: We would buy specific bags in advance. There are only two Transfer Station attendants and using standard bags is easiest for them to monitor.
9. Q: Where would the bags be sold?
A: The Harvard General Store is open to discussions about selling the bags. We are developing a list of other locations around Harvard. Examples might be the Shop & Save in Ayer, or a nearby hardware store. Suggestions are welcome. Note that it is not possible to sell the bags at the Transfer Station.
10. Q: What if I have a special event that generated a lot of trash in a given week, despite a usually small trash output on average? Is the limit on bags an annual limit or a weekly limit?
A: Neither. There is no limit on the number of bags. We buy a roll of bags, and we use them as we need them. If you have a special event and you have extra trash, you would just use and take more bags to the Transfer Station.
11. Q: Is there a limit to the number of SMART bags I can bring to the Transfer Station?
A: No, there is no limit. That's one advantage of the SMART program.
12. Q: Do I have to use the Transfer Station? Can I switch to a private trash hauler?
A: Yes, you can use a private trash hauler. There is a list of approved private haulers on the town website (Board of Health, "Environment, Trash & Recycling"). However, MA is tightening the regulations for private trash haulers as well. The Harvard Board of Health updated the trash hauling regulations in November of 2017 requiring all trash haulers to provide customers both trash and recycling services and to encourage customers to separate out recycling.
13. Q: What happens with the current senior discount for a permit?
A: We expect there will still be a senior discount. Details are still being worked out.
14. Q: Is there any way to offer incentives for *very low* trash households, maybe a mini bag?
A: The SMART program is an incentive program. We are still discussing bag sizes.
15. Q: How will you dispose of something which doesn't fit in one of the approved bags?
A: This is on our list of things to discuss. It is likely that the bulky item punch cards will still be used. The Transfer Station attendants are already skilled in handling bulky items.

Financial Questions

16. Q: How will the finances work under SMART?
A: There will be two costs: the permit will cover the operating costs of the Transfer Station (electricity, labor, etc), and a fee for each bag which will cover the tipping costs (the costs to dispose of trash).

17. Q: Does the Transfer station pay for itself now?

A: The goal in setting the annual permit fee is that the Transfer Station breaks even every year.

18. Q: How much does it cost to operate the Transfer Station?

A: The cost in 2017/18 was covered with the \$250 annual permit. The cost for the 2018/19 permit has not been set yet.

19. Q: How much does recycling cost the Town?

A: The commodity price for our recycling varies. The current international markets for recycling are uncertain, with anticipated increased costs.

20. Q: How much will the bags/roll of bags cost?

A: We don't know yet. This is on the list of things to discuss.

21. Q: Why do we have to pay so much for each bag?

A: The bag fee is calculated to cover the "tipping costs" – the price the town pays to truck out and dispose of trash. The cost of the bag itself is a small part of the bag price. Other MA towns have seen that switching to bags encourages residents to reduce the amount of trash they generate and encourages more recycling – meaning households use fewer bags.

22. Q: Can you show us potential for money saved by increasing recycling and reducing trash?

A: Yes, coming in the near future.

23. Q: What would happen if many current users chose not to get a permit?

A: If a large number of people stopped using the Transfer Station, it could mean a short fall. However, our advisor from Mass DEP (who has helped many other towns change to a SMART program) says that in her experience only a few people drop out. And other people realize SMART is a more economical option for them and join the Transfer Station.

Transition Questions

24. Q: Will the traffic flow change? I think the more streamlined and obvious things are, the easier and more accepted practices will and could be.

A: This is on our list of things to discuss. Groton has just added color-coded signage to the different collection areas of their Transfer Station (ReUse, Recycling, Waste, Special Handling, etc) to match the recycling information cards they sent to each household. But color-coded signage is not something we can do in the first year of the program.

25. Q: Will there be volunteers there the first couple of months helping people?

A: We think that would be a wise idea. Do you want to help? Please send us an email.

Recycling Questions

26. Q: Is there a limit to the amount of items I can recycle?

A: No, there is no limit on recycling.

27. Q: Can Harvard go to “single-stream” recycling? Can you make recycling easier like the private haulers do?

A: We don’t recommend single-stream recycling. Because our recycling is separated, we are paid the highest amount possible for it. Once a town goes to single-stream recycling, the price that companies pay drops significantly, as does the amount of recycling that can be used. In one study we found, if glass is combined with cardboard, the facility loses 40% of the revenue and 40% of the useable cardboard due to glass contamination.

Right now Harvard has “three streams”: 1) paper, 2) glass, and 3) plastic/metal containers. You have the option of separating out bottles with a deposit to donate to the Boy Scouts.

Questions about alternative systems

28. Q: Does it have to be a special bag system? Could the trash be weighed instead? I know a town in NY which uses a small platform scale. Put your garbage on the scale, weigh it, and have your punch card punched.

A: We’ll put this on the list of things to discuss. But if everyone has to stop and weigh their trash would that slow down the flow of traffic? Also, there might be some logistical challenges: we would need a scale, shelter for the scale, and another attendant to punch the cards.

29. General questions

30. Q: Is one paper compactor adequate? As more people switch to online ordering, there is more and more cardboard at the Transfer Station.

A: That is an interesting question. We’ll look into it.

31. Q: If more people begin to recycle, will the cardboard and/or plastic compactors fill up partway through the day?

A: This is on our list of things to discuss.

32. Q: Can the traffic flow at the recycling area support more cars?

A: This is on our list of things to discuss.

33. Q: Can the Transfer Station be open more hours?

A: This is on our list of things to discuss.

34. Q: Can the town return to accepting Styrofoam as it did a few years ago? Styrofoam can be large and awkward to bag.

A: The town stopped taking Styrofoam when the facility in Fitchburg that was taking Styrofoam went out of business. This isn't a perfect solution, but the Recycle Your Reusables event held in October in Ayer has taken Styrofoam the last couple of years. Can you save it and take it there? <https://recycleyourreusables.wordpress.com>

General Comments

35. Q: It feels as though I am being forced into buying special trash bags that I ordinarily would not buy in order to effect more recycling. I guess there's no way around that, and in truth, it's a small matter.

A: Most residents do buy trash bags; this program would just mean we buy specific colored ones (if that is the proposal that is adopted). They would come in a roll, like any garbage bag, and should you run out, don't forget – your neighbor probably has one you could buy in a pinch.

36. Q: Personally, between recycling and composting, I only take one bag out every few weeks and would absolutely welcome savings over the flat-fee sticker system. Thanks!

A: You're welcome!

37. Q: Please get bags that fit standard sized trash cans, the same as you might purchase at the grocery store (preferably with some easy mechanism to tie them off). In one town I know in NY, the SMART bags are a weird size that don't fit properly into any garbage can.

A: Noted.

38. More information

39. Q: How can I get more information on this program?

A: We have requested a webpage for the Transfer Station Committee on the Town website. There will be updates to this FAQ posted there. It will also list contact information for the committee members. And come to our meetings.

40. Q: How can I find out more about what I can recycle?

A: Harvard is part of MassToss, the North Central Region Waste Disposal Cooperative. Their website has some very useful information including pages on Recycling, Hazardous Waste disposal and information on textile recycling. Go to www.masstoss.com and click on Recycling in the left-hand column.