

# TOWN OF CHINA

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## **China Transfer Station Survey (A Manual for Decision-Making)**

Report to the China Select Board  
On the  
Survey on Solid Waste Disposal\$\$\$

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2011**

**January 2012**

**BACKGROUND**

Reason for the Survey

Waste disposal costs for the Town of China are expected to increase in the near future due in large part to the already announced increases PERC will be charging municipalities. So the Town Manager has been seeking ways to limit the increases as much as possible—if not actually decrease the town's over all waste disposal costs—by both (a) decreasing the waste stream for which the town must pay disposal costs and (b) increasing waste associated revenues (primarily through recycling).

The Town Manager's discussions with the Select Board over an extended time indicated that, before considering changes, the Board would need to have a better idea about what townspeople would support if there were to be changes to the current practices and policies the town has for solid waste management. To gain some insight into what China's citizens think about current practices and prospective changes, the manager proposed and the Select Board agreed to survey citizens about the direction they'd like to see the town take.

Survey Distribution

A survey was designed to inform China residents of the increase in costs, provide some information about recycling, and get an idea of the direction residents' would be most interested in taking given the town's current solid waste management fees, policies, and practices. The survey was not designed to provide a comprehensive list of all the possible scenarios and options since that would not be possible. But it did provide an opportunity to get opinions on some basic variations (e.g., voluntary and mandatory sorting of trash as well as fees and financial incentives) and to glean residents' comments. The survey (see Appendix A) was then distributed in late June 2011 as follows:

- 288 surveys were sent to a random sample of residents (*Note 1: Starting with the seventh occupied property on a real estate list, every 11<sup>th</sup> household was sent a survey. The only exceptions to using an 11<sup>th</sup> was if there was a duplicate addressee/person or a land-only account, in which case the next occupied, non-duplicate addressee was sent a survey. Otherwise the pattern was consistent.*)
- 30 surveys were sent to known renters

*[Note 2: The above two groups of surveys, when completed, were grouped together for subsequent separate analysis to provide as close as possible to a statistically valid cross section of China residents as possible.]*

- Surveys were distributed for additional residents to participate and offer their opinions and ideas. “Self-selecting” survey respondents cannot be as reliably counted on to represent a larger group’s opinions as a random sample. However, additional surveys were circulated to provide an opportunity for as many interested citizens as possible to share their views and ideas. These surveys were made available via the following means:
  - Approximately 2,400 were inserted into copies of *The Town Line* edition at the end of June; these were copies destined (as those of the recent library survey were) only to China residences.
  - Placed at the Town Office for citizens to pick up
  - Placed at the town libraries for citizens to pick up
  - Handed out at the Transfer Station

Various efforts were made to increase the number of all responses, including having reminders in *The Town Line* and sending reminders to those sent surveys as part of the random sample. Those sent a survey as part of the random sample were also provided with a stamped return envelope to make their returning surveys as simple as possible. There were also an array of prizes (see the sample survey in Appendix A for details) offered to those respondents willing to provide a card with contact information with their completed survey [*Note 3: No respondent’s identifying information was used in any way in the collection or tabulation of survey data. The only ways in which the cards were used were (a) for the prize drawings and (b) to identify households that were sent surveys and had responded. This last step was taken so that when reminders about completing the survey were sent out, they were not (wastefully) sent to those households that had already responded.*]

Surveys were due in early August. Data entry and tabulation began in mid-August and was completed by the end of December.

## RESULTS

### Returns

The total number of all surveys returned was 524. The breakdown of returns based on the source from which they were distributed is as follows:

- 197 from those distributed to renters and randomly to China residents
- 327 from the other sources, specifically:
  - 224 from those distributed via *The Town Line*
  - 44 from those picked up at the Town Office
  - 59 from those handed out at the Transfer Station

*Note 4: It appears likely that two surveys picked up at local libraries were returned. Unfortunately, at this time, it is unclear into which of the three "other sources" they were added. This point, while unfortunate, does not seriously affect the general outcome of the survey. The numbers above for the three other sources will be used herein, though it may be that one or two of them are off by a count of up to 2.*

A summary of the results for the random sample (197) as well as of the total number of all surveys (524) is provided in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively.

### Major findings

*Notes 5 & 6:*

- *This analysis has been made as simple as possible by keeping the many written "other" responses separate from responses for specified answers that the survey provided. The "other" responses and other written comments are available in Appendix D but are not folded into tallies with other data.*
- *Two sets of tallies were made: (a) one for all responses received and (b) one for those surveys sent to renters and to the random sample of China residents. These two tallies were used to help ensure that both (a) as much feedback as reasonably possible was gathered and (b) as solid a cross section as possible of China's residents' views was also provided.*

#### 1. China's citizens care about the subject.

- a. According to the Town Manager, more surveys were returned for this survey than for any of the other surveys the town has recently done, including the library survey that was distributed in a similar manner and had a very good response rate. More specifically, for both surveys, the return rate for the surveys sent to renters and to those selected in the randomized sample was similar (Library 61%; this survey 62%). But for the library survey the self-selected surveys included 150 returned out of the ones distributed in *The Town Line*, whereas for this survey 224 were.
- b. The surveys provided little/no evidence of anyone upset with being asked to complete a survey. Even those people who made comments to the effect of "leave things as they are" did not make comments about the subject or survey being unimportant—quite the contrary.
- c. The written comments ("other" answers, specifics about what they recycle and—most of all—"additional comments," all of which are in the Appendix D) were copious. People do not usually take time to write comments without an interest in the subject.

2. The majority of citizens are at least ready for—if not preferring—a change. The answers to questions #1 and #4 for both the total group of surveys and for the random sample demonstrate this.
- a. Question #1 which asked about making changes (either requiring recycling or changing policies to provide financial incentives for recycling) vs. making no changes had an overwhelming response for change.
    - i. All responses: 77% of respondents indicated wanting one of the two changes suggested (first two answers) while only 15% wanted no change (third answer).
    - ii. Sample responses: 72% wanted one of the two changes while only 17% wanted things to stay the same.
  - b. Question #4 asked about proportionality in payment of fees (i.e., having fees for trash so that trash was paid for based on the cost of disposal and on who incurs the cost) vs. leaving the current system as it is, with property value determining how much citizens pay for trash disposal.
    - i. All responses: 306 or 58% favored change while 153 or 29% favored leaving things as they are.
    - ii. Sample responses: 53% favored change while 32% indicated wanting the current system to stay as it is.
    - iii. Note: A fair number of written comments on this question indicated:
      1. That some citizens are concerned about fairness and about people paying their fair share. These concerns were echoed in some responses and comments on other questions (including Question #5's mention of income—i.e., some citizens feel strongly that neither income nor nature of the trash (business vs. personal) matters—but that fairness does—i.e., you produce it, you pay for it).
      2. That some citizens are concerned about their having to bear what they perceive as more fees or costs, and about how any additional revenue might be used.
3. There is reason to expect that people might do more recycling.
- a. Answers to Question #3, which dealt with what people are currently doing, indicated most respondents are doing at least some recycling (91% and 88% for all and the sample respondents, respectively). This is only self-reporting (not objective reporting of actual recycling done) and covers a range between recycling a few things and recycling as much as possible. That said, getting people to build on what they are already doing or perceive they are doing can be easier than getting them to start. Given this and that many written comments supported recycling generally and supported China doing more recycling, it seems reasonable to conclude that a significant portion of China's residents are ready to do more. In contrast, only 6% of all and 7% of the sample respondents, respectively, indicated that they choose currently to do no recycling.

- b. Written comments also generally expressed an interest in wanting to recycle more if it could be easier (e.g., single sort recycling) and wanting the town to be able to handle more things for recycling (e.g., plastics, though more plastics are now already accepted).
4. While the majority of respondents appear ready for a change, and many are at least prepared for the idea of paying a fee, there is not a clear mandate for a pay-as-you-go system. The responses to Question 5 are wide ranging, with no answer receiving a simple majority. In addition, about one of five responses was a written out “other” answer. More specifically:
- a. The first two answers, which called for some type of fee-for-bag system, garnered together roughly a third of the votes (35% of all respondents and 37% of sample respondents).
  - b. The last two answers, which called for no fee if some amount of recyclables were brought in, received a bit more support (45% of all respondents and 39% of sample respondents). But, likewise, it does not provide a perspective of a true majority.
  - c. The answers to these two pairs of options, though, do show a pattern: in each pair, the response with the least possibility of cost (financial or effort) for the individual household was preferred. That is to say, between the first two responses (one calling for a paying for every bag and the second calling for paying only for “extra” bags), the second choice—which provided for a lower immediate cost for the citizen—got a strong majority of the votes (all responses: 48 vs. 133; sample responses 23 vs. 50). Between the last two responses (one calling for having to have a certain amount of recyclables and the second calling for having just any amount), the second and lower effort (for the individual household) response got significantly more support (overall responses 87 vs. 146; sample responses 24 vs. 53).
5. There is virtually no support for and several vehement comments against income level being a factor to consider if fees were charged. Comments indicate that there is no reason that income level should either (a) excuse people from creating trash or from taking steps to recycle, or (b) keep people from paying as others have to pay.
6. Other concerns voiced included those about:
- a. If there are new requirements,
    - i. how would enforcement of them work and how would enforcement be paid for
    - ii. mightn’t (more) trash be dumped inappropriately (e.g., on road sides)
  - b. Reducing trash being the “right” thing to do; that China should have greater environmental awareness and responsibility

- c. Fairness in who pays for what—both concern about people producing trash having to pay for what they produce and concern about people having more fees/taxes to pay than they already do
  - d. China being sure to consider a variety of ideas for how to distribute costs. These included a number of variations on the ideas presented in the survey, ideas from other communities, and using headcount in each household (more people, more bags/allowance for more trash).
7. Other things learned included:
- a. There was appreciation voiced and support given to having more education provided to citizens. There were a fair number of these comments suggesting education efforts being made at the Transfer Station.
  - b. It was clear that education efforts have made a difference (comments from people knowing what the town recycles). But others made it clear that more that can be done (particularly comments about some items not being recyclable when, in fact, they are—i.e., there are people who do not know yet what is/is not recyclable in China).
  - c. There are people who are well informed about various options for recycling (e.g., single-stream/zero sort recycling), so that “new” ideas may not present challenges to all (or perhaps most) China residents.
  - d. There are people who are fearful that they will be asked to pay more and get no benefit as a result of doing so.