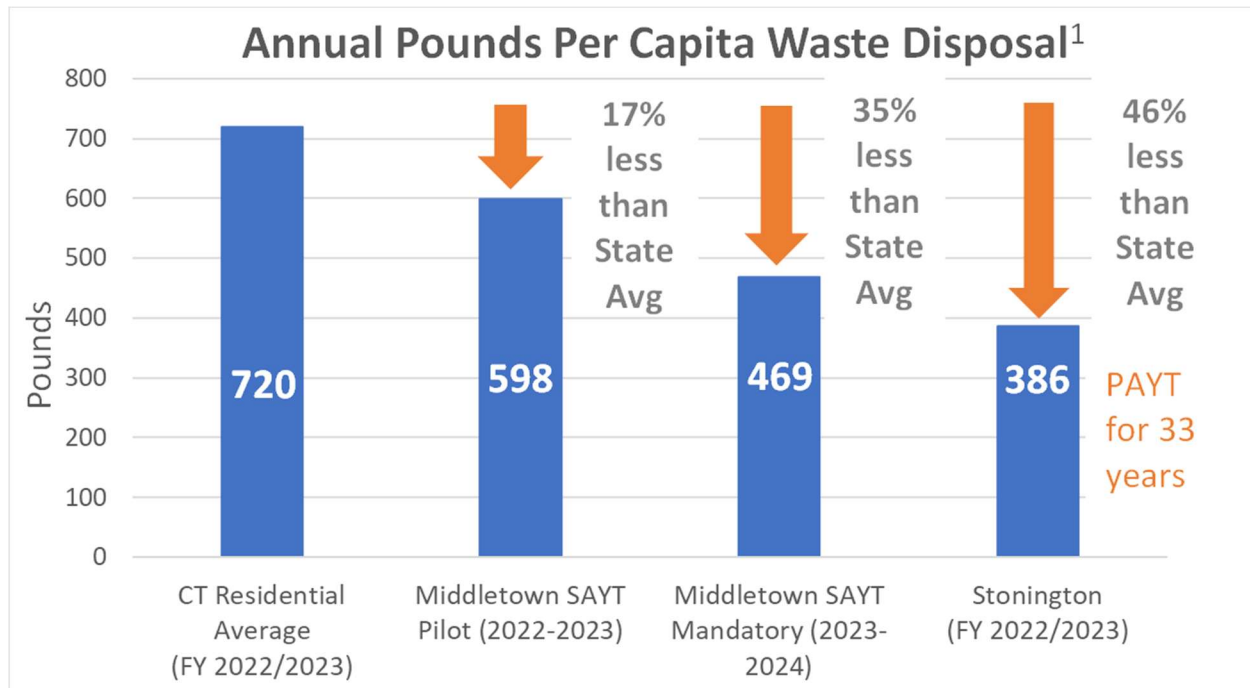




Middletown's Save as You Throw (SAYT) Program

Middletown's Save as You Throw (SAYT) Program positioned the City as a leader in sustainable materials management at both the state and national levels. The City's Sanitation District disposed **35% less trash per capita than the Connecticut state average** when the pilot program became mandatory in its second year. The reduction was achieved through food scrap diversion, increased recycling and source reduction behaviors such as buying less and reusing materials.



Source: Data provided by Middletown and Waste Zero, DEEP's SMM Grant Program Consultant

QUICK FACTS

Estimated Sanitation District Households: 2,800

City Population: 47,700

Voluntary Pilot: Nov 2022 – Oct 2023; **Mandatory Program:** Nov 2023 – Dec 2025

DEEP Grant Funding: \$902,590

The SAYT pilot (Nov 2022–Oct 2023) and mandatory program (Nov 2023–Dec 2025) were implemented in the downtown Sanitation District, where households and businesses pay bi-annual user fees for

¹ Prior to the pilot, the Sanitation District did not record dumpster and cart users separately. These data constraints made it difficult to calculate a baseline, therefore the pilot analysis used the estimated statewide average at the time of the pilot (2022-2023) at 720 pounds per capita per year for a proxy baseline.

municipal trash and recycling collection. Residents were provided free orange trash bags and green food scrap bags during the pilot year, along with guidance to limit disposal to two bags per week. Residential trash collected in orange bags was sent to a Connecticut waste-to-energy facility or out-of-state landfill. Food scraps collected in green bags were delivered to Quantum Biopower's anaerobic digester to produce renewable energy and soil amendments.

PILOT AND MANDATORY PROGRAM RESULTS

During the pilot year, Sanitation District trash tonnage dropped 17% from the State average. Of that total tonnage reduction, 11% was attributed to food scrap diversion and 89% to recycling and source reduction. In 35 weeks, residents captured 96,690 pounds of food scraps, all diverted to Quantum Biopower. Compared to typical municipal materials management interventions, Middletown's SAYT pilot achieved notably stronger waste reduction outcomes. The transition to a mandatory program in late 2023 resulted in a reduction of 35% from the State per-capita disposal average.

OVERVIEW

Sanitation District Fee Structure

Middletown operates its Sanitation District as a user-fee-funded system.

- Residents and small businesses generally use 96-gallon carts and are charged based on:
 - The number of carts
 - The number of collections per week
- Larger businesses and large multifamily properties use dumpsters and are charged based on:
 - Dumpster size
 - Collection frequency

Financial Shortfalls Identified Early

When the grant was executed and the Sanitation District budget reviewed, two fundamental issues emerged:

- Fees had not been adjusted for over 10 years, despite rising disposal and operational costs.
- Dumpster account revenues failed to cover actual service costs, imposing residential cart users to subsidize commercial and large multifamily accounts.

Year 1 Policy Decisions & Fee Restructuring (Mandatory Program Launch, Sept 2023)

To move the program from pilot (voluntary) to mandatory and establish a unit-based pricing co-collection program:

- Dumpster fees were not adjusted.
- The City adopted a two-tiered fee structure for cart users:
 - Base fee: Reduced from \$400 to \$280 per cart per year to cover fixed collection costs.
 - Variable bag fees: \$1.65 / \$1.00 / \$0.70 for 33-, 15-, and 8-gallon trash bags to cover the cost of contents disposed in the bags; and food scrap bags at \$0.25 and \$0.15.
- An assistance program was created to provide free bags to qualifying households.
- All businesses using carts were now required to participate.

This adopted structure:

- Lowered costs for small waste generators
- Incentivized waste reduction and food scrap diversion
- Did not address budget shortfall related to commercial dumpster users

Year 1 Outcomes:

- Annual trash per capita (lbs.) dropped from the pilot year from 598 to 466.
- Per-capita disposal dropped well below the State average of 720 lbs/year.
- The City received complaints, largely from a small but vocal opposition group.
- Enforcement was inconsistent, limiting the program's full effectiveness.
- Sanitation District budget remained out of balance due to commercial dumpster rate shortfall.

Year 2 Decisions & Continued Budget Deficit

Despite waste reduction, the program was experiencing a structural deficit. The Sanitation District Commission presented three policy options:

Option 1 (Recommended)	Keep SAYT for residential users and fully increase commercial dumpster fees to match cost of service.
Option 2 (Chosen)	Maintain SAYT but reduce bag fees, partially increase dumpster fees, and end the free bag assistance program except for special cases.
Option 3 (Not Recommended)	Eliminate SAYT bags and revert to (higher) flat fees for all users.

Common Council Action (Sept 2024):

- Adopted Option 2
- Implemented partial dumpster fee increases
- Added a missed-pickup fee for noncompliance after 3 warnings.
- Replaced free bag assistance with lower-cost bags for all residents by lowering bag prices to \$1.35 / \$0.85 / \$0.60 for 33-, 15-, 8-gallons respectively.

Year 2 Outcomes

- Annual per-capita residential waste (lbs.) decreased slightly from 466 to 446, remaining well below the state average of 720.
- The budget deficit persisted, primarily because the dumpster rate was not adjusted to cover associated costs.
- Enforcement barriers continued: complex four-strike process, staffing shortages, route-tracking challenges, and inconsistent collector cooperation.
- Bag revenue losses from noncompliance (residents not using the proper bag) contributed to revenue shortfall but were secondary to the unrealized dumpster fee increase.

DECISIONS & CHALLENGES

Over the three-year grant period, the City experienced significant staff turnover including the departure of two Public Works Directors, the Recycling Coordinator who originally championed and designed the program, the Mayor, and key Sanitation District accounting staff. These departures led to staffing shortages, but the more significant consequence was the loss of institutional knowledge. Decisions made early in the program's development, many tied to nuanced operational constraints or budget structures, were no longer understood by incoming personnel. Newly onboarded staff were left to

reconstruct the program's logic without the historical context required to interpret earlier decisions, complicating program management, budget planning, and enforcement.

Enforcement barriers compounded these challenges. The City repeatedly delayed enforcement, over-complicated the process, and ultimately never implemented an effective system. A four-strike procedure, staffing shortages, inconsistent cooperation from collectors, and limited route-tracking capacity collectively prevented meaningful enforcement. As a result, many residents did not comply with program requirements and were not held accountable, leading to widespread confusion about expectations and undermining participation.

CONCLUSION

In November 2025, the Common Council voted to end the SAYT bag program and transitioned to new higher residential cart rates:

- \$480/year for standard 96-gallon carts (approximately \$80 more than pre-pilot)
- \$430 and \$360 for smaller cart sizes

Food scrap diversion will continue only through drop-off sites, representing a step back from the universal curbside collection previously offered and likely reducing overall food scrap capture. The SAYT program achieved meaningful reductions in residential waste and clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of unit-based pricing.

While the City's decision reflects its challenges, the evidence from both the pilot and mandatory phases shows that Middletown residents responded to the incentives, and the program delivered measurable environmental benefits. The shift back to flat fees may not resolve the underlying budget pressures, but it represents the City's chosen path as it continues working toward a solid waste system that is both financially sustainable and responsive to community needs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT: Deep.RecyclingProgram@ct.gov

Middletown's Sanitation District SAYT pilot and mandatory program was funded by CT DEEP's Sustainable Materials Management Grant Program.