

Push for Trash Hauling Changes Gaining Momentum

by Sandy Perlic

Residents unhappy with noisy trash trucks going up and down their streets on multiple days of the week have engaged in a letter-writing campaign over the past several months to ask city council to change the current collection system. Although discussion about potential alterations is still in the preliminary stages, some of the options being talked about are: dividing the city into zones or “districts,” with one trash hauler collecting all of the residential waste within that area; awarding a contract for all residential garbage collection within the city to a single subcontractor; and taking on responsibility for the chore as a city-owned utility.

Wanda Mayberry is one local resident who is unhappy with the city’s current trash collection situation. “My opinion is that there are too many trucks on the road too many days, and it doesn’t need to happen,” she said.

Of the 24 houses on her block, Mayberry says that most contract with Gallegos for trash collection, some neighbors are serviced by Waste Management, and others are collected by Ram Waste Systems. She has even occasionally seen a truck from the now-defunct Dick’s Hauling on her street. Since each company runs at least two trucks per week, one for trash and one for recycling, that’s at least six trucks per week contributing to noise and air pollution, and street wear-and-tear.

“I would very much like to see a simpler (system),” Mayberry said.

It was complaints from residents like Mayberry that prompted State Representative John Kefalas to organize a community forum earlier this summer entitled “Trash Hauling and Recycling in Fort Collins: Can We Do Better?”. Held on June 13, the forum included speakers from city council, local trash haulers Gallegos Sanitation and Ram Waste, the Solid Waste directors from Larimer County and Loveland, the city’s Natural Resources Department, and local resident Mary Smith. Although no conclusions were reached at the forum, problems with the current trash collection system were discussed, and many residents voiced their concerns about its unfavorable impacts.

Recently some city boards and a task force have joined the clamor for a better way of doing things, according to Susie Gordon, an environmental planner with the city’s Natural Resources Department. “The Air Quality Advisory Board wrote a memo to council (recently) recommending that the council look at creating a city trash utility,” she said. Then a task force working on a city climate protection plan expressed an interest in the idea. And in July, “The Natural Resources Board met, and they discussed it as well, and they formed a recommendation for council to look into it,” Gordon said.

The idea of changing the way residential trash is collected in Fort Collins is not a new one. In 1995, citizen complaints about trash truck traffic led council to adopt a policy to reduce the average number of trash trucks per week from six to two on at least 80-85% of the city’s residential streets. Three years later, the city contracted with a consulting firm for a feasibility analysis of a districted trash collection system, where one hauler would collect all of the residential waste in a designated zone.

The analysis concluded that, at that time, “Districting would result in a reduction to the number of trash and recycling trucks traveling on City streets. According to the City’s model, this reduced number of trash and recycling trucks would reasonably be expected to also reduce traffic congestion, noise and air pollution and street maintenance costs.”

The report estimated that street maintenance savings would be roughly \$322,000 per year, and residents could also expect to save a collective \$500,000 per year as a result of the less expensive rates that a districted system would foster.

Although the analysis favored changing to a districted system, “Council was very aware at the time that there were some possible consequences to going to that type of system that they didn't feel they could resolve,” Gordon said at the June forum. The major concern at the time, according to Gordon, was that every hauler may not receive a proportionate share of residential accounts.

Local trash haulers Gallegos and Ram Waste are still concerned about impacts to their businesses. Although their general managers declined to comment for this article, at June's community forum Mark Glorioso, general manager of Gallegos Sanitation, said, “If we do make changes, we would have to eliminate jobs.” He also expressed concern about recovering the investment he's put into his trucks, which cost \$220,000 each.

Furthermore, Glorioso feels that districting will not reduce the costs that residents pay for trash service. “Prices are being kept down because we're all trying to provide the best possible service we can to you to maintain our customer base,” he said.

Ray Meyer, general manager for Ram Waste Systems, agrees that the current system has advantages. “This is a very very clean city, and a lot of that has to do with the competitive system we're in,” he said. “The system we have, I believe in it. I also think that people still want a choice.”

Some people, however, do not believe that having the freedom to choose which company picks up your trash should outweigh the benefits of switching to a districted or single provider system. Bruce Philbrick, the director of Solid Waste Management for the city of Loveland, has first-hand experience with a single provider system, since Loveland took over waste collection for its residents more than 40 years ago. “The biggest cost of doing trash and recycling collection is just getting a truck on the road and getting an operator in that truck. When you can pick up from every household on the street, it's inherently much much more efficient than the existing system that the city of Fort Collins operates,” he said.

Philbrick does not believe Fort Collins needs to take over trash collection as a city-owned utility, as Loveland has, in order to realize the benefits. “You can achieve the same levels of efficiency with private companies, just having them assigned to one zone or district of town. But clearly the existing system is inefficient, and the bottom line is, it costs Fort Collins residents a lot more money than a district-zoned system for collection.

“...What it comes down to is this: is it the city's responsibility to protect the interests of a handful of waste haulers, or is it the city's role to best represent the interests of the entire community? And I think that, just by answering that question, it's clear which direction the city should go on this,” Philbrick said.

Councilman Ben Manvel hasn't yet decided the best option for addressing concerns about the present system. “I think pretty much everybody agrees – probably even the trash haulers agree – that in terms of natural resources, what we're doing is not optimal. The only thing people don't agree about is the solution,” Manvel said. “Obviously the alternatives go all the way from having a municipally-owned and operated trash service as they do in Loveland, to (maintaining) the status quo... I am interested in looking at all sorts of solutions that there may be in between the two extremes I mentioned, including incentives for people to district voluntarily.”

Manvel pointed out that many homeowners associations designate one trash hauler to be used by their residents, and some neighborhoods which are not organized into associations have tried to follow suit and get homeowners to agree on a single provider. “Of course if even one person on the block chooses not to do that then you've got a problem,” Manvel said.

Mayor Doug Hutchinson said that before implementing any changes to the way trash is collected in the city, council needs to have all the facts. “I think the right approach to issues,

especially complex ones like this, is to make sure that this is data-driven.” However, he questions how far the city should go in regulating trash hauling or operating a municipally-owned service. “We really have to ask whether it makes sense to have government doing those kinds of things,” he said.

Councilwoman Lisa Poppaw agrees. “On the question of whether or not to do a city-owned trash utility, if the private sector is doing the job efficiently and cost-effectively, then it's better than having a city government involved. But if there's a better way of doing it, then let's get everybody to the table and have a conversation about it,” she said. “You know, I don't want to put anybody out of business. I don't want to see that happen. But by the same token, I want to make sure we're doing the best thing for the citizens of Fort Collins, and for our community.”

Sidebar

Fort Collins isn't the only city to wrestle with the issue of the best way to collect trash. Lafayette, Colorado recently decided to make the switch to using one hauler for all the city's residential waste. Here, Lafayette's Director of Public Works, Doug Short, explains the city's decision.

Q: What was your trash collecting situation before making the change?

A: It was a free-for-all, with at least half a dozen haulers. There were some real big national companies, there were several local companies, so we had the whole spectrum of trash hauling and recycling.

Q: Why did you switch to subcontracting?

A: There were three reasons. The first reason was that we found out there was a huge price discrepancy between HOA (homeowners association) and non-HOA areas in the city. The HOAs were getting their trash and recycling done for very very low money each month, and the non-HOA people were subsidizing them by paying more than double at times. Number two was that the city wanted to try and recycle more, and be good stewards of the environment. And the third issue was all of the other environmental issues (because of) all of the different trash haulers with all of the different trucks: wear and tear on the street, the noise pollution, the air pollution. (We wanted) to try and get that down to a more minimum level.

Q: How did you come to this decision?

A: About three years ago, the council-appointed waste reduction advisory committee started talking about trying to promote more recycling. The council liaison to the group brought back that idea to council during their annual goal-setting retreat, and they decided “Let's go forward on it.” So I started working on the process, working with our city attorney, working with Eco-Cycle – the local Boulder County organization that really helps promote recycling – and we wrote a (request for) proposal and sent the proposal out in April or May 2006. We sent it out to every trash hauler in the phone book in Denver and Longmont, so there were 96 of them, but we only had six proposals that came in. Then we had a huge public hearing last fall where the proposals were reviewed. I made a presentation with my recommendation of which trash hauler I thought was the best overall proposal and met the requirements. And people came up to the podium... the comments went the whole spectrum. But the council agreed this is something we should be doing.

Q: Let's talk about the new program. The way I read it, homeowners associations that already had an existing contract with trash haulers...

A: ...are exempt. But at the end of their contract, or if they wish to opt out of their contract, they are more than welcome to join the city program. I'm hoping that once they see this program, and especially when they see the single-stream recycling that's going on, that they'll

want to join.

Q: Are your rates competitive with the other haulers doing the HOAs?

Yes, they're very very competitive. It might be just a little bit more than the HOAs are paying, but we're offering single-stream recycling where they're going to have to separate their recycling and put them in the little tiny bins. We're going to have a big 96-gallon recycle toter.

Q: And what about your contract with the proposal winner?

A: In five years, we'll re-bid our contract. It has a price escalator based on a CPI (Consumer Price Index) number, because they have to have something for increased labor cost, fuel costs, and equipment costs.

Q: Is your system only focusing on the residential end?

A: By state law, I can only offer it to single family, and then multi-family units up to seven units in a building. If it's eight units in a building, it's considered by state law a commercial account, and I cannot impact businesses, commercial and industrial accounts.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: I'm excited about this, and that's what it takes. It's going to take someone in Fort Collilns to really hold that banner high, and carry it... and council has to make a stand for what's good for the community. But all the rest of the country does this. Colorado is one of the few states where it's still a free-for-all. Usually cities regulate the trash and the recycling, either with contracts, or through ordinances, or through their own municipal system.

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