

JULY 27, 2010

The Politics of Garbage

Desperate Budgets Prompt Cuts in Trash Pickups; City Weighs Fees for Residents

By JOANNA CHUNG And CLIFFORD M. MARKS

Of all the recent cuts to local budgets, one in particular is raising a stink: cutbacks in garbage collection.

In Livingston, N.J., residents now have to haul their trash to the curb themselves. A budget crisis in Yonkers led to a switch to once-a-week from twice-a-week trash pickups; after resident protests, it was switched back again. Even New York City is weighing charging for collection, an idea that has some city residents trashing City Hall.

"I think it's just ridiculous," said Michael Morrell, a retired public-school teacher in Staten Island. "Next thing, they're going to start charging us for the fire department when we need to make a call."



Alan Zale for The Wall Street Journal

A pile of garbage in Yonkers.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg said last week that he was considering charging residents for garbage pickup as the city looks at "every single thing" to help cope with strapped finances.

Companies and restaurants already pay for garbage pickup, the thinking goes, so why not those living in apartment buildings and residential homes? "We'll put it in the mix and we'll see which thing we want," the mayor said during a news conference last week.

New York City spends \$1.2 billion of its \$64 billion yearly budget to deal with waste from residences, schools and nonprofits.

Other townships and municipalities across Greater New York are already being forced to make various adjustments in trash collection.

It's a testament to the severity of local budget crises that garbage collection—a service many residents regard as highly important—is now being put into the mix of possible cuts.

"The stuff that is easy to get rid of has largely been done in the last couple of years. Now things that are generally thought of as essential government services are going to get cut," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.

He added: "Governments are facing the kind of unpalatable choices that they haven't had to face—maybe ever."

In July, Paramus, N.J., began requiring that residents drag their trash curbside instead of having it picked up elsewhere in their yard. Collection of bulk trash was recently axed in Bridgewater Township. Weekly bulk-trash pickup in North Haven, Conn., will soon be limited to twice a year, in September and April.

"Even if you can trim a half percentage point in your budget, it can be significant," said Robert Ward, deputy director at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government in Albany.

Police and fire expenditures are often harder to reduce than others because they usually involve union contracts that provide little flexibility, particularly in the short term, Mr. Ward said.

In some cases, trash-related cutbacks have met stiff opposition from residents. Some worried that curbside collection would be unfair to elderly townspeople, who tend to be less mobile, though many towns make exemptions for the elderly or disabled.

Allendale, N.J., was concerned about aesthetics, according to Mayor Vincent Barra. His town discarded a possible curbside change earlier this year after hundreds of townspeople signed a petition against the move.

The primary reason, he said: "Trash blowing around in the wind and being out all day looking unsightly." He hasn't ruled out the option in future years, however.

In Yonkers, after trash pickup was slashed to once a week earlier in July, collection workers engaged in a work slowdown to protest the firings that resulted in the cuts, according to town spokesman David Simpson. "There were a lot of calls," Mr. Simpson said. "People were very frustrated." The city reverted to twice-a-week service a week ago.

"There have been mayoral elections lost or won over snowplowing," said Mr. Ward. "I'm not sure there has ever been any lost over cuts in garbage collection, but it's not something a mayor would generally want to do because voters care about it so much."