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## Garbage fee issue awaiting council

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**By Helen Gao**

The San Diego City Council ended its summer session so badly divided that it couldn't agree on a response to a grand jury report suggesting a fee for municipal trash service.

Several responses were sent, with a cover letter saying the council could not reach agreement.

When the August recess ends, the issue won't be going away.

As part of the budget deal for the fiscal year that started last month, the council agreed to form a commission to look at the city's revenue situation. Budget Committee Chairman Tony Young wants to form the panel in September and make recommendations next year.

Even the name reflects the split on the council: the Citizens' Revenue Review and Economic Competitiveness Commission, which serves those on the council who believe the city needs more revenue, and those who think higher taxes are bad for business.

The commission will study San Diego's revenue structure and compare it to other cities' – an exercise that inevitably will involve discussing whether San Diego should charge single-family homeowners a fee for trash pickup as many other cities do.

Carl DeMaio, the most vocal anti-tax advocate on the council, endorsed creation of the commission.

"We are going to look at city revenues from two angles. Obviously, there is a group of people on the City Council who are eager to raise taxes," said DeMaio, who stressed that he remains steadfastly opposed to raising taxes.

Young, who is running for re-election next year, insisted he is not creating the commission to justify tax increases. He suggested that the commission could suggest lowering taxes.

"One thing I cannot allow to happen is that this becomes the commission to look at the trash tax," Young said.

"This is about looking at our revenues and our competitiveness throughout the region, seeing if we are actually generating enough revenues to provide services the people in the city of San Diego want."

The council also has asked for an audit of all city revenue sources, such as property tax, sales tax and business taxes, to make sure they are being properly collected.

In addition, the council wants a scientific survey to figure out what level of service residents

expect from the city. The audit and survey will be used by the new commission.

Murtaza Baxamusa, director of research and policy at the left-leaning Center on Policy Initiatives, believes the creation of the commission signifies a sea change in city politics.

The center is an advocate for a trash fee. It has long argued that the city's budget problems are the result of inadequate revenue.

"People have a less knee-jerk reaction to raising revenues than they did in the past," Baxamusa said. "The city politics themselves are changing. The city electorate has become more democratic.

"What we are seeing is people are responding more to the message of restoring service quality and protecting that quality of life that they see in San Diego, and that is quite important. That does leave open the door for the willingness to pay for that quality of life they expect.

Councilman Todd Gloria said he is pleased that the commission will analyze the city's revenue in the context of what services citizens desire.

"Until recently we have been solely fixated on cuts," Gloria said. "What I am hearing from our constituents is those cuts are beginning to be out of line with their expectations on what they want in their communities."

The City Council, which is made up of six Democrats and two Republicans, cannot unilaterally impose a trash fee. Adopting a fee would require a vote of the people to overturn the 1919 People's Ordinance, which prohibits the city from charging for trash collection.

The Republicans on the council – DeMaio and Kevin Faulconer – have consistently opposed a trash fee. Councilwoman Sherri Lightner also has signaled that she won't support such a fee.

Young and Councilwoman Donna Frye have shied away from supporting a trash fee as well.

Only council members Gloria, Marti Emerald and Ben Hueso have shown an openness to considering a trash fee, but even they have not actively championed putting that issue on the ballot.

Gloria and Emerald signed a memo stating that they believe the current trash collection system is inequitable because some people don't have to pay.

Under the People's Ordinance, trash from single-family residences is collected by the city and with no fee while garbage from most businesses, apartment complexes and condominium developments is collected by private haulers, which charge fees.

Hueso has made the case that adopting a variable pricing strategy for trash pickup – charging fees based on the amount of trash generated – can help increase the city's recycling.