



S.D. City Council Talks Trash

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By Katie Orr

Trash collection in San Diego has a messy history. The City Council waded into the issue Tuesday when it was forced to respond to the County Grand Jury's report calling for San Diego to start charging for garbage pick up. It's an issue that's vexed local lawmakers for years. KPBS reporter Katie Orr says the council had trouble formulating a response.

On a recent morning in University City, a San Diego garbage truck made its rounds. Operating the truck is now a one man job and humans don't have to touch the trash. Instead a mechanical arm glides out, grasps the city-approved bin and mechanically lifts, empties and lowers it in a matter of seconds. The truck takes care of six houses in about three minutes. Nanci Hunter, who owns one of those homes, says she wouldn't object to being charged a small fee for trash collection. She thinks most of her neighbors would be all right with it too.

"I think in my neighborhood are OK. And \$10 to \$12 a month isn't exorbitant, it isn't," she said.

But Hunter says she does worry about people who aren't as well off. She says she doesn't want the problem to be solved on the backs of those who can't afford it. District 3 Councilman Todd Gloria is worried about that too. The city spends about \$54 million a year on refuse collection. Under the 1919 law known as "The People's Ordinance," San Diego can't charge you for trash pick up if you can get your garbage to a public street in a city bin. Gloria says many of his constituents live in large apartment complexes and end up paying for private service. He says that makes the ordinance unfair.

"Either everyone pays or you don't. Looking at the majority of my constituents, knowing they pay because they live in multi-family apartment dwellings where they do pay over and above what people in single family homes pay, that's inequitable. It just is," he said.

But District 5 Councilman Carl DeMaio says people who live in San Diego already pay for trash pickup because they pay taxes that go into the city's general fund. He says the city should fix its financial situation instead of double dipping for trash collection.

"We did it with the People's Ordinance the first time by charging some people for trash by saying we're not going to collect it because we found a loophole," said DeMaio. "Now we're going to do the same thing by charging people twice across the board. That, sir, is inequity."

But with revenues shrinking, free trash pickup is becoming more difficult to justify. Every other city in the county charges for waste disposal. Fees range from about \$14 to \$23 a month. In San Diego, a fee can't be charged unless the people vote to overturn the People's Ordinance. A vote on the issue has been seen as risky in the past because it's assumed a fee would be shot down. Murtaza Baxamusa, who is with the Center on Policy Initiatives, says the key to gaining people's support is to link their money to the services they receive.

“There is no such thing as a free lunch. In the end we’ll end up paying for it in reduced quality of services in other areas and a structural deficit that bites in to the way in which our parks, our libraries, our police officers and our security suffers as a city,” he says.

But Baxamusa says he’s not optimistic progress will be made in overturning the ordinance any time soon. In the end the city council literally agreed to disagree. It voted unanimously to send the Grand Jury several responses with a cover letter saying the council couldn’t come to a consensus.