

R&E Assessment of New Year-Round Yard Waste Collection Program

If you received a notice from your cable company saying your bill would increase by \$13 a year for a new service, you might question whether it was a service you wanted or needed. Naturally, if the service improved convenience or otherwise offered a tangible benefit, you might want it. If not, wouldn't you want the option to decline the service, and the fee?

The above scenario is strikingly similar to the new, year-round, weekly yard waste collection being mandated by the Arlington County Board.

While most Arlington residents are supportive of efforts to increase recycling, R&E believes the proposed program is faulty on a number of levels including the approval process, cost and convenience and efficacy.

The New Program

The new year-round yard waste collection program requires another waste collection cart (32 or 64 gallon, your choice) in addition to the existing black trash and blue recycling carts. Another waste removal contractor will be driving its own separate fleet of trucks on neighborhood roads year-round, picking up carts, disrupting traffic, and trucking yard waste to a composting facility up to 25 miles distant. The waste to be collected is primarily grass clippings.

Beginning July 1, residents will no longer be allowed to place yard waste in black trash carts. It must be placed in the new green carts. Plastic bags used by lawn services, will be banned.

Users have until June 16 to 'opt out' of receiving the new yard-waste cart, but they will still be required to pay the increased annual refuse fee. Carts won't be delivered until August or September. Until then, users must use the brown craft paper leaf bags or bundle yard waste for collection. It is unclear at this time whether the county will continue to provide the paper leaf bags at no charge.

The existing fall leaf collection and by-request brush pickups will continue as before. The spring yard waste collection is being suspended.

A Faulty Process

When this program was initially presented to the Civic Federation last fall, it was advertised as a pilot or trial program. At the time, little financial information was available and few other details were provided. Now we are being told that the program is mandatory, that it's a 'done deal'.

Cost and Convenience

Admittedly, an additional \$13 per customer is not going to break the bank. However, there is no excuse for imposing such a fee if it isn't necessary, and in the aggregate this will cost Arlington residents over \$1 million per year. Particularly galling is the penalty for residents that 'opt out' of the program, as they will still be required to pay the fee. The fee is imposed on vacant residences as well.

Residents will now have to store and use yet another collection cart. Many of us have little space for existing carts. It also requires putting yard waste that is presently collected in paper bags or the black

cart into yet another cart. We understand that fines may apply for those who put waste in the wrong container.

Efficacy

For years, the county has collected and composted leaves in the fall and yard waste in the spring. Therefore, no improvement in the recycling rate can be attributed to the amounts already being collected. It is difficult to understand the benefit, especially to residents, of diverting approximately 9200 tons of waste per year that is presently collected in paper bags (provided by the County) or in black carts. Why buy new carts, sign a five-year contract, and pay \$50 per cart if you're simply diverting yard waste to a facility up to 25 miles distant?

The program is also a major disincentive for residents that leave grass clippings on their lawn (as recommended by many environmental experts) or maintain their own compost piles. Even if you follow these environmentally-friendly practices, you'll still be required to have a new cart (that you may never use), or if you don't want the cart, pay for the privilege.

While the County estimates that 25% of waste in black carts is yard waste, it also notes that 18% is recyclable material that should be in blue cans. One can only wonder why a greater effort isn't being made to encourage better utilization of the blue carts. This alone, without any additional cost or inconvenience, would greatly improve the recycling rate. And, if the non-compliance rate for the new cart is the same as the blue carts, any increase in the recycling rate will be difficult to achieve.

Exactly what is to be gained from the new program? For residents, virtually nothing. For the County, IF the program reaches estimated levels, it will gain bragging rights for increasing its recycling rate from about 50% to 60%.

R&E's Fact-Finding Efforts

In Oct 2013, staff produced a timeline indicating that additional financial details about the program would be included in the fiscal year (FY) 2015 budget. However, there is no discussion of the residential year-round yard waste collection program contained in any of the publicly available FY 2015 budget documents. (The adopted budget document is not yet available online.)

While County staff noted a line-item for contracts in the FY 2015 budget related to year-round yard waste collection, there is no (new) year-round yard waste collection contract line-item listed in the Dept. of Environmental Services summary section or in any other part of the FY 2015 budget.

Because the contract for the year-round yard-waste collection contract had not yet been signed, staff was unable to provide R&E with hard numbers related to the collection. For example, staff could not tell R&E whether the annual refuse fee might have decreased but for the addition of the new yard waste collection program. Nor could R&E determine the program's overall annual cost, though a range of \$600,000 to \$1 million a year has been an informally inferred based on what little hard data is available.

Staff could not provide an assurance that diversion of yard waste from the present collection would not result in the County's inability to meet its waste tonnage commitment (a requirement that applies jointly to Arlington and Alexandria) to the waste to energy (WTE) plant. Currently, Arlington and

Alexandria together must deliver between 46,000 and 66,000 tons of waste (trash) to the WTE plant annually. Should Arlington and Alexandria fail to meet their joint tonnage commitment, they would have to pay the WTE operator for any shortfall (approximately \$43 per ton) on top of paying the full cost for collecting and diverting yard waste to a compost facility.

Limitations of Year-Round Collection

Most of the county's yard waste not already being diverted from the waste stream appears to be lawn clippings, and typically lawns produce clippings for no more than 8 months out of the year. Staff acknowledges that there would be little yard waste to collect in the winter months, but insists that suspending yard waste collection in wintertime isn't feasible and wouldn't significantly reduce costs.

R&E noted the significant emissions that waste collection trucks generate. These trucks typically get less than 3 miles to the gallon, and 80% run on diesel fuel. According to [INFORM, Inc.](#), "heavy-duty diesel-powered vehicles, including garbage trucks, make up only 7 percent of vehicles on the road, [but] they contribute 69 percent of on-road fine particulate pollution and 40 percent of nitrogen oxide emissions." These trucks also are a source of noise pollution.

Staff's responded by saying that by Dec. 2014 all the yard-waste collection trucks will run on compressed natural gas (CNG), which should reduce emissions. CNG trucks are more expensive than diesel trucks, and natural gas is still a fossil fuel that is now oftentimes being extracted through hydraulic fracturing (aka "fracking").

Though staff believes that the convenience of the green carts and the banning of yard waste from the black carts will change homeowner behavior, it's difficult to know whether this will occur. Most yard waste that goes into the black carts is hidden in black plastic trash bags, just like all other trash. Trash haulers do not have time to consider what a bag might contain or to open it for inspection. And there are no plans to provide additional county staff to identify offenders and enforce this ban.

Thus, without a more thorough analysis, R&E cannot definitively conclude that the year-round yard waste collection is as environmentally beneficial as other alternatives. For example, could the county more easily and cost-effectively achieve an increased recycling rate by offering incentives (or disincentives) to ensure that all household recyclable materials end up in the blue carts instead of the black ones?

Conclusions

Mandatory participation clearly penalizes those residents who already compost all yard waste on their own property. It also seems unreasonable to increase another fee—on top of recent real estate assessment increases—for approximately 11% of Arlington's seniors (and others) who are living at or near the poverty line. R&E strongly urges the county to allow residents to opt out of the new collection program without penalty.

The bottom line is that this program raises serious questions about cost, convenience, process, and efficacy with little or no direct benefit to residents.