

**CITY OF UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS, OHIO
SERVICE & UTILITIES COMMITTEE MEETING
JANUARY 4, 2023**

Present were: Councilwoman Sheri Sax, Chair
Vice Mayor Michele Weiss
Councilman Chris Cooney (Committee member)
Councilman Justin Gould (Committee member)
Councilman John Rach (Committee alternate)
Councilwoman Barbara Blankfeld
Councilman Brian King
Mayor Michael Brennan
Dennis Kennedy, Finance Director

Mrs. Sax called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. She reported that Mr. Jeff Pokorny, Service Director, had a death in the family and unable to attend this meeting.

A comprehensive explanation of the work the committee has done over the past year was provided. Mrs. Sax stated that the goal was to follow up with the 2020 Solid Waste Study recommendation to the extent that the committee can. She noted that it is ultimately up to the administration to fulfill and actualize the recommendations according to the will of University Heights residents.

Mrs. Sax chronicled the goals of the committee, providing definitions and clarifying terms, and descriptions of the recycling process. The following represent comments Mrs. Sax made as she referred to a written document, much of which is included here. She entertained questions following her remarks.

Recommendation #1 Education and Awareness pertaining to recycling:

This committee has brought expert presenters to our forum resulting in recycling improvement education and composting education, which help lead to a centralized composting site at the Walt Community Park.

Education information provided at the meeting was for the purpose of clarifying definitions with an emphasis on recycling “Industry Standards”. Mrs. Sax stated she spoke to representatives at various agencies at the forefront of influencing and establishing “industry standards” from the Recycling Partnership, Solid Waste Association of North America [SWANA], Ohio EPA, etc.

1. “Recycling Deserts” are communities with little or no access to recycling collection on household property; and/or unreasonable distances to access recycling centers.
2. The term, “Curbside collection” is the industry standard to address and oppose “recycling deserts. “Curbside” describes collection at the residential property.
3. Backyard/side door collection is a convenient type of curbside collection. Backyard and side door collection terms were used interchangeably during this presentation.
4. The various Materials Recovery Facilities [MRFs] have equipment to accommodate and accept a greater variety of recyclables like yogurt cups, etc., that our current MRF cannot process. There are also MRFs who include trash audits as part of their cost which our current MRF does not. There are even MRFs publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange which implies more oversight – which is not done by the MRF with which we are currently contracting. Finally, there are MRFs which can possibly bid competitively for improved cost efficiencies.

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After speaking with various agencies, it appears that there are different schools of thought regarding 100% participation, “opt-in” participation and other aspects of recycling:

- 1) According to The Recycling Partnership:
 - 100% participation provides tools access to all who may otherwise have a variety of barriers to getting a recycling container i.e., language
 - 100% free cart distribution including confiscating carts if repeatedly being used in an abusive manner i.e., for contaminated waste
 - Same-day rubbish and recycling collection is preferred when automated curbside collection is in place. This is to address a "set-out issue" which doesn't exist with backyard collection

- 2) According to Solid Waste Association of North America [SWANA]:
 - Residents should first be provided with the pros and cons of recycling and various methods of doing so providing the right-to-choose vs forcing it upon them. Since some residents do not value recycling, providing 100% with bins can result in unwanted contamination

 - Allow people to opt-in voluntarily vs forcing them to comply with distribution and then confiscating carts for non-compliance which may feel punitive

 - SWANA advised to remember that the primary objective of rubbish collection is a sanitation and public health service to ensure proper sanitation

 - The system should be efficient which may mean rubbish and recycling may be collected on different days of the week to maximize the latter which is doable since side door collection does not pose “set out” issues/confusion

Recommendation #2 Customer Service

This is the critical point since service provision is the main thing cities provide to taxpayers.

In an effort to provide the highest level of customer service of rubbish and recycling collection, University Heights residents were provided with two (2) opportunities to express their preferences. In both instances, the top three (3) preferences identified include:

	BWC Survey	CCSWD/RRS Survey
Maintain Current Backyard Collection	63.5% Very Satisfied	49%
Recycling Importance: Improve Rates	66% Very Important	65% - 84%
Maintain City Municipal Service Staff	61% Prefer	N/A but 49% infers

It is very clear from both surveys that the majority want better recycling.

A discussion then took place regarding the expenses associated with the various refuse collection models. Mrs. Sax distributed and reviewed a Collection Cost Comparison Summary Spreadsheet. Mrs. Sax stated that “staffing reduction” is more accurate, rather than “layoff” because staffing levels are administrative decisions. She also clarified that the five-year capital expenses annualized related to equipment is \$55,000 amortized. Mr. Cooney was thanked for pointing out both items.

Mrs. Sax emphasized that the spreadsheet shows there is not a significant savings nor is there data to support improved recycling through curbside refuse collection. Based on the Collection Cost Comparison Summary Spreadsheet, labor staffing reduction is the only significant cost savings variable which residents indicated they do not wish to pursue. Vice Mayor Weiss observed that every collection scenario shows basically the same expense and that savings in municipal in-house automation is through staff reductions. Mrs. Sax confirmed this and pointed out that the spreadsheet numbers are current with December 2022 actual and 2023 budgeted numbers. She submitted this spreadsheet to Finance Director Kennedy for a cursory review which he conducted and approved noting expenses for each rubbish collection scenario as follows:

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1. Current In-House Backyard Collection incl. bagged recycling: \$1,835,585
2. Municipal In-House Backyard Collection incl. loose recycling: \$1,833,085
3. Municipal In-House Automated Curbside Collection that included *STAFFING REDUCTION OF SEVEN (7)*: \$1,084,834
4. Municipal In-House Automated Curbside maintaining current staffing: \$1,850,919
5. Fully Outsourced Automated Curbside \$1,876,368

The final points of the 2020 Solid Waste Study include:

3.1 Trash Program: The study advises the City to “consider re-routing the entire city to obtain the best efficiency for trash routes (with) demonstrated cost savings of 10-25%”.

There are numerous results and suggestions for computer programs to assist. University Heights’ trash collection routes have not been re-routed for 18 years since 2004.

3.2 Resident Requirements for Rubbish Collection: The administration can decide if and/or how to implement more effective communication and education to improve rubbish and recycling collection from both residents and service personnel perspectives.

4.1 Recycling Program Kubota Modification: The study suggests changing the front recycling cans to 45 vs 32 gallon. If this committee recommends transitioning to loose recycling, then the administration can weigh the data and present a plan to Council for backyard loose recycling which may include the appropriate number of personnel and equipment to accomplish this task.

4.2 Transitioning to loose recycling and provide 18-22 gallon recycle totes to replace blue bags. Bin size may be different i.e. 32-gallon bins, with input from the Service Director.

4.3 Consider modifying the packer truck fleet to hold recyclables if Kubota front cans remain at 32-gallons (see 4.1)

5 Paper Program: If automated curbside is not implemented as point #6, then the 2020 Solid Waste Study recommends promoting the paper program to include cardboard. This may be considered as we embark upon establishing a new service facility.

Mrs. Sax stated that the points reviewed rest in the hands of administration to include in a plan as the committee has done as much as they could. She proceeded to ask for questions from Committee members and then for questions from others in attendance.

Mayor Brennan asked if a decision had been already made regarding loose recycling in the backyard. Mrs. Sax stated that this scenario has been mentioned in public meetings since March 2022 and she took a step back when it became apparent that it would not be a good decision to continue recycling using blue bags. This would continue to be discussed further in public meetings. Since then, due diligence has been conducted and presented in public meetings throughout the year and now is the time to discuss in a more directive manner.

Mayor Brennan asked what due diligence has been done to reach the determination that there should be loose recycling in the backyard. Mrs. Sax stated that there have been presenters discussing these matters, including representatives from the Cuyahoga County Sewer District, Don Johnson from Kimble, etc. describing the pros and cons, mostly cons, for blue bag recycling. Mrs. Sax reported that she has also visited other service departments, reports of same have been publicly recorded. She noted that she spoke to at least a dozen service departments and service directors in Cuyahoga County.

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Mrs. Sax stated that she recently spoke to representatives from agencies that establish industry standards confirming discontinuing recycling collection using blue bags. The surveys provided clear direction of what residents want to move forward in an effective manner that meets their needs.

Mayor Brennan asked who among the presenters recommended the loose pickup in the backyard. Mrs. Sax stated that the presenters discouraged using blue bags to recycle not specifying collection location. The backyard scenario is discerned from both surveys. Mayor Brennan asked where the survey included the question of loose recycling in the backyard. Mrs. Sax stated that he was asked in a public meeting; Mayor Brennan stated this scenario was deliberately omitted as an option due to its expense. Mrs. Sax referenced the Collection Cost Comparison Summary Spreadsheet showing backyard loose collection is actually not more expensive than any other collection method. Mayor Brennan noted that there was agreement that the question whether residents would want loose recycling pickup from the backyard was not in the survey. Mrs. Sax stated that the residents indicated their preference for backyard collection of all rubbish and that they want recycling improvements.

Vice Mayor Weiss clarified with Mayor Brennan that he does believe loose recycling is the best way to go. Mayor Brennan stated that loose recycling is the best way. It was mentioned that taking bins to the curb was a more expensive method. Mayor Brennan stated that there is no data from either study on this method.

Mr. Rach stated that the more expensive option Mayor Brennan is referring to is separating loose recycling in both the front and backyard. The former model proposes that both occurrences are in the backyard. Mrs. Sax agreed.

Mr. Gould commended Mrs. Sax stating she has done a fantastic job of synthesizing the data provided by both studies. He stated that the committee has heard from several people, and that more needs to be done to increase recycling participation. He referred to Mrs. Sax's comments about Shaker Heights utilizing backyard collection for all rubbish and loose recycling. He believes there is an opportunity to begin the modernization process of recycling, and the first step could be changing from blue bags. He stated that pickup doesn't necessarily have to change at the same time, but believes it is the step in the right direction with the first step changing from the blue bags. Mr. Gould stated that this honors survey results and the desires of the residents to recycle and also keep the backyard option.

Mr. Cooney discussed financial constraints based on a significant cost difference with keeping service collection in-house and transitioning to automated curbside pickup, would reduce the number of staff required than what the City has now. Mrs. Sax reiterated that the only significant cost savings occurs with addressing and reducing labor costs. Mr. Cooney noted a 38% difference with between \$67,000 and \$100,000. Mr. Cooney expressed concern of attracting rubbish collectors. He also referenced the Baldwin Wallace survey, noting that younger residents prefer the convenience, but it is expensive.

Discussion ensued regarding the desires of future residents, age considerations, and residents moving into the city having been accustomed to curbside pickup and will probably want the same. Labor costs were addressed, the matter of attracting talent to fill the requirement of lifting 50 pounds, maintaining budget expenses, and the possibility of raising wages. Mr. Cooney stated his opinion that he interpreted 61% of respondents prefer the current system and people living in University Heights for the next 10 to 20 years prefer curbside collection.

Addressing Mr. Cooney's concerns, Mrs. Sax agreed that the significant savings is through staff reduction, but the survey indicated that at this time, residents want to maintain service levels. Last year the administration said in public meetings that the service rubbish collection workers would be maintained and assigned different tasks. However, this is inaccurate because University Heights does not own the equipment and our rubbish collectors do not possess the necessary skill sets to be reassigned to the outsourced service-related jobs that cost almost half a million dollars. Mrs. Sax agreed to the importance of cost reduction but cannot ignore the wishes of resident taxpayers at this point in time noting there are residents who have lived here for decades.

Regarding Mr. Cooney's comment about finding labor, Mrs. Sax reported that during the Shaker Heights Service Department tour, the service director showed us the equipment and described the processes used to collect rubbish, including loose recycling from the backyards. It may be useful to turn to Shaker Heights as a model since their service director told our committee there is little turnover and high morale in that department.

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Mayor Brennan stated that Shaker Heights is having labor difficulty just like us; since December, they posted a request for refuse collectors with six positions open including a sign-on bonus. He cited the possibility of layoffs versus attrition, and that our city does not have full-time workers currently in the Service Department. He referred to debris

at Purvis Park, claiming it has not been removed due to staff shortages. Mayor Brennan mentioned that last month, a new hire in the Service Department has not shown up to work. The number of employees in the department was discussed, and Mayor Brennan stated the City is ready to hire, but not getting people because the systems need to be adapted so that the work isn't so difficult with consistently lifting and hoisting heavy loads. He described an employee who just could not physically do the strenuous work required.

Mr. Rach asked whether other service models were examined regarding vacancies and turnovers. He noted that the problem is consistent across the board and that he does hiring for his firm and is having difficulty filling professional positions.

Mrs. Sax noted that there is a contract with Minutemen for leaf collection and wondered why Purvis Park is not cared for through outsourcing. Mayor Brennan stated that the contract with Minutemen through the union's collective bargaining agreement (CBA) only allows us to outsource service work for ten weeks which has been exhausted and that Minutemen can now only be used if there is a disaster. Mrs. Sax stated that it wasn't the best decision to dump leaves at Purvis Park without forecasting how same would be collected.

Mrs. Sax noted that there is a disparity with the tonnage collected throughout the week and that reassessing the routes could more evenly distribute the tasks which may address at least some of the service collectors' issues. She referenced the employee Mayor Brennan described who could not do the work, suggesting that the situation could be addressed and remedied through analysis, similar to an incident report.

Mayor Brennan stated that there is a way to make these jobs a little easier and more competitive, and noted that other cities have in-house collection remedies as part of the service department which don't require the physical toll that happens in University Heights.

Vice Mayor Weiss asked Mayor Brennan about the possibility of reducing staff, noting that Council was told by him in the past in public meetings that staff would not be reduced. She asked the Mayor if he is now indicating that staff will be reduced in order to get the municipal automated curbside? Vice Mayor Weiss stated that she would consider that, but if staff would not be reduced, then none of this would make sense because there would be an amenity reduction without a cost reduction. She stated that the majority of residents enjoy backyard pickup, so there is an option to switch to loose recycling in the backyard.

Vice Mayor Weiss stated that if the Mayor is going to reduce the staff, she is ready to consider the municipal automated option, but that had not been indicated previously. Mayor Brennan stated that he has always said that he would not lay off people. Discussion continued regarding positions in place, full-time versus part-time.

Mrs. Blankfeld asked if there is a distinct difference between laid off and let go. Mrs. Sax stated she retracted that term (laid off) at the beginning of the meeting. Vice Mayor Weiss applauded Mrs. Sax for the spreadsheet and for visiting service departments, and speaking to national organizations, going beyond committee member's duties.

It was pointed out that there are 18 employees in the Service Department which led to a discussion about attrition and retirement. Mrs. Blankfeld wondered what funds would pay for equipment and employee training to do other tasks in house. Mr. Cooney stated that there was mention that there is grant money available for curbside pickup.

Mr. Rach noted that in the second survey, one out of three individuals preferred automated pickup, but the other two-thirds did not. Mr. Rach noted that out of the responses, 57% responding chose to keep backyard pickup, to maintain it to some degree. Councilman Rach stated that the numbers are there, and he did not understand why this is still being debated.

Mr. Gould noted that the second survey included all of the JCU students. It was then pointed out that the students living on campus were not considered.

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At this time, Mr. Rach stated that this comes down to the numbers, and that with reference to the trend that younger people prefer curbside, there could be a different answer in ten years. The matter of flexibility of not having to be at

home to have trash removed from the backyard was discussed. Mr. Cooney and Mr. Rach discussed pros and cons, including convenience and costs related to trash removal, and what is budgeted, employees filling the service department positions, the will of the people, etc.

Mayor Brennan disagreed, stating he believes that transitioning to curbside collection is not against the will of the people. Discussion ensued regarding the results of the survey(s) comparing each. Mr. Rach reiterated that he has a hard time going against the will of the people that wanted to keep back yard or some pick-up component. Mayor Brennan and committee members had conflicting ideas of the survey results.

Mayor Brennan asked Mrs. Sax why the spreadsheet indicates a reduction of \$15,000 for Minutemen when they are necessary to use as temporary seasonal employees due to service staff shortage. Mrs. Sax suggested that if outsourced service work (referring to Minutemen) was brought in-house under any of the collection scenarios, this cost could be reduced because the service that Minutemen does is actually something our in-house service department could absorb due to our equipment and skill set. She stated that this is an administrative decision.

When asked about the line item of \$55,000, Mrs. Sax reported that it refers to a capital truck expense of \$275,000 which would be amortized over several years. This garbage truck would be available if one breaks down as the current trucks are aging, referencing a schedule for same that Mr. Pokorny provided. It was noted that this is a replacement.

In response to questions by Mayor Brennan, Mrs. Sax detailed scenarios of handling the cycles of the service crew, including reassessing the routes and changing how the trash is placed into the trucks, i.e., recycled items first, retrofitting current equipment, contacting EPA regarding reimbursement possibilities, etc.

Mr. King commented that he had gone on the tour to Shaker Heights and that their Kubotas are different from ours, and that would be a significant investment for the city. Mrs. Sax responded that the easy way out is to buy equipment, but there are other ways to figure out the City's resources to make the existing system work better. She mentioned that Shaker Heights employs welders to retrofit their equipment cost effectively which led to continued discussion regarding the difference in equipment. Mayor Brennan suggested that a consultant would be needed to assess service department's routes to which Mrs. Sax observed that the City's service director is an engineer and therefore capable of talking to colleagues to learn best practices to appropriately re-assess collection routes. Vice Mayor Weiss suggested that service staff may have good ideas and insight.

Vice Mayor Weiss stated that this meeting has been productive and again commented on the solid work by Mrs. Sax. She stated that the surveys show most residents want to keep back yard pickup. She said that because residents also want to increase recycling, the city could purchase bins for residents who wish to recycle and that the City should seek bids for the MRF contract. She also agreed with Mr. Cooney's concern about imminent costs pertaining to municipal facilities. Mrs. Blankfeld agreed that recycling should be an "opt-in" program.

Mrs. Sax referred to a new group in University Heights, the "green team" and wondered if the group would be interested in assisting with outreach and communication.

Motion by Mrs. Sax, second by Mr. Gould, to refer the following directives to Council:

1. Continue backyard rubbish and recycling collection transitioning to **modernized** loose recycling
2. Update rubbish routes for improved efficiency
3. Administration to obtain quotes for the city to purchase 32-gallon or comparable recycling bins (not carts) in order to modernize our city's recycling efforts transitioning to loose recycling collection in backyard

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4. Voluntary sign-up identifying households choosing to recycle:
 - a. Free of charge
 - b. Consider collaborating with the “UH Green Team” together with On-line and other methods of outreach to maximize participation/sign up and to receive recycling education to improve household, capture behavior with correct recycling printout in order to reduce “wishful recycling” and unintended contamination

Mrs. Sax thanked everyone for their input and passion and extended a collaborative olive branch to engage in productive discussions to figure out a plan to move forward.

The meeting adjourned at 7:50 p.m.

Submitted by:

Jeune Drayton
Assistant Clerk/Council

Sheri Sax, Chair
Service & Utilities Committee