

Understanding the Cost of Waste & Recycling

A Guide to Doing it right in Lawrence and Mercer Counties

Our trash gets no respect. Paying to get rid of something we no longer want or have need for is one of the last things we want to do. Many people believe that their trash and recycling bill are expensive and some people are still under the wrong impression that their recyclables are valuable and that recycling should be free. This Fact Sheet was designed to help you understand the basics of curbside waste and recycling collection programs.

I don't generate a lot of trash. Why should I pay that much or subscribe to service?

It doesn't matter if you put out four bags a week or one bag a month, the trash you generate is the cheapest expense associated with your bill. The hauler's fixed costs are the greatest expense. Labor, equipment, and fuel, among other things are expensive. If your service level includes trash picked up weekly and your recyclables bi-weekly, your hauler is required to be at your house faithfully to provide that service. If you do not put out any trash or recyclables on your scheduled collection day, your hauler must show up and still incurs the cost associated with getting their equipment and workers to your home.

Curbside Waste & Recycling Collection

Collection is available through subscription services or municipal contracts. With subscription services, residents are free to select their hauler of choice. In municipalities with contracts, residents, and sometimes businesses, are required to use the contracted hauler. As a third option, residents in areas without municipal contracts, may choose to haul their own waste to a permitted landfill or transfer station.

Pros and Cons of Contracted Service

Customers of municipal contracts typically enjoy uniform programming at a significantly reduced cost. Using one contractor means everyone has the same service, less vehicle noise, and roadway wear and tear. Municipal contracts may also include spring/fall cleanups and/or other special collection opportunities. The reason for the reduced cost is that when the hauler knows how many homes need service, they know their precise cost per home. Some haulers refer to this as a "base fee" which ensures that their costs are covered, even if a customer doesn't put out any materials. Ideal contracts require all households to participate which keeps the cost down for everyone. Although rare, a municipality may also require its business to participate in the contract. The primary disadvantage to a municipal contract is that residents do not have the ability to choose their own hauler.

Pros and Cons of Subscription Service

Subscription-based residents have the freedom to pick their own waste and recycling provider and can pay for additional services such as bulky item collection or electronics recycling. Cons to subscription programs include: fees that may be more than twice as much as those paying for a municipal contract; additional noise and roadway wear and tear from multiple companies running multiple vehicles at different times; and differences among service providers. The higher fees with subscription services are the result of haulers not having consistent customer bases and customers that may be spread out over an area versus a dense contracted area.



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Think About It...

The cost of the latest high tech cell phones could pay for almost four (4) Years of trash and recycling in a municipal contract

Bag Programs

Although rare, some haulers offer service through the purchase of special bags. This type of service is an inexpensive option for people who do not generate a lot of trash. Additionally, since the service is bag-based a person using this service can put multiple bags at a time that are the result of a large gathering or home cleanout. Trash in recyclables is a problem often cited as plaguing bag programs because as people put trash into recycling bins to avoid paying for additional bags. Other cons include not having recycling as part of the service or paying additional for recycling if it is offered (which can be a detriment to recycling) and a loss of revenues for the hauler unless a base fee is included. Bag programs can also contribute to a communities' illegal dumping problem when residents dump their material instead of purchasing more bags.

Illegal Dumping and Theft of Services

When trash and recyclables aren't managed properly, there can be significant problems that are expensive for municipalities and damaging to our health, economy, and environment.

Illegal dumping and littering are on-going problems for many communities. Potentially hazardous items, including electronics and chemicals, can directly damage our environment and contaminate our soil and drinking water.

Illegal dumping and littering is also expensive. It's much cheaper to manage trash properly the first time than pick it up after it's been illegally tossed along a roadway. Keep Pennsylvania Beautiful has documented that it can cost up to \$1,000 to clean one ton of illegally dumped trash. When done right the first time, it only cost \$40 to \$60 a ton to take it to one of our local facilities.

Theft of services results when trash is placed into a dumpster (usually a business dumpster) without permission. A business paying for dumpster service is paying for the "space" in the dumpster. That "space" is stolen when trash is illegally placed in the dumpster. This can be an expensive problem for a business, especially if hazardous materials such as electronics are dumped, and is frequently reported in municipalities with subscription-based or bag services.

Public Perceptions and Attitudes

As a society our own attitudes are often the biggest obstacle to a good waste management program. We are conditioned to spend money on items we want but reluctant to spend money to properly dispose of that item when its useful life is over. Is that monthly trash bill really expensive? In our area, the cost of a single month of cable/satellite or cell phone service can pay for almost a full year of trash and recycling collection in a municipality with a contract.

Looking for More?

Be sure to check out our other fact sheets about Illegal Dumping, Hiring a Hauler, Recycling Myths, and more.



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