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Reading City Council approves new plan to collect trash and recycling

By Don Spatz

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City Council voted 4-2 Monday to establish a new plan to collect trash and recycling, now called curbside waste, as well as the fee to pay for it.

City attorney Fred Lachat said he expects the recycling plan to go to court again, and the change is one of several items needed to avoid having the fee shot down again.

In October, the Commonwealth Court ruled the city's recycling fee of \$82.33 a year per household is illegal, because state law allows municipalities to pay for their recycling program only with state grants and the sale of recyclable materials.

That ruling would have applied to many Pennsylvania municipalities that charge recycling fees, but in January it was voided by a federal court because the city resident who won it had filed for bankruptcy weeks before it was issued.

U.S. bankruptcy law requires an automatic stay of all collection actions as soon as someone files for bankruptcy, and the bankruptcy judge refused to lift the stay for the state court action.

Council members Marcia Goodman-Hinnershitz, Christopher Daubert, Dennis M. Sterner and Stratton P. Marmarou voted for the new city program and the fee, while Councilwoman Donna Reed and Council President Francis G. Acosta voted against them. Councilman Jeffrey S. Walton Sr. was absent.

Here's how it will work:

Options

Residents will get two options: Combined trash and recycling collection or, if residents have a private trash hauler, just the mandatory recycling collection.

Both options will include the existing collection of yard waste (except grass clippings) but there also will be a new program, an annual citywide spring cleanup that will kick off this year on May 10.

The Great American Cleanup also will continue, but solid waste manager Frank Denbowski said that affects public spaces like parks and sidewalks. The citywide spring cleanup, he said, will allow people to get the bulk items out of their homes, including electronics and old tires.

Fees

The city has been billing trash customers through the Reading Area Water Authority but not recycling customers since October, although collections continued.

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The two programs will merge with the May bill, when the city will bill recycling-only customers \$11.48 a month, and combined trash and recycling customers \$29.09 a month.

The recycling fee will pay for the entire year retroactive to Jan. 1, but through eight payments from May through December.

(The city decided against another option, to issue a four-month catch-up bill in May and then bill monthly after that.)

Next year, the recycling portion of the bill will drop to a monthly bill of about \$7.65.

A flyer explaining the program will be mailed in the water authority's April bills.

In discussions earlier Monday, Acosta said he supports entirely shutting down the recycling program until the city, the courts and the Legislature figure out what's going on.

"It's a crapshoot," he said.

"My crapshoot is that we're going to have a lot of crap out there" if there's no recycling, said Goodman-Hinnershitz. She said the the fees are a real bargain.

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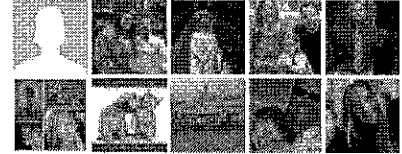
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