

5/17/11

# Leaf policy creates mounds of confusion

## Part 1 of 2

**G**ranted, I hadn't been paying attention. When the city delivered the big green waste container to my house sometime last year, I didn't even know that my acceptance meant I'd automatically opted out of the right to dump yard clippings in the street.

But that right is locked into Sacramento City's charter. So when the green waste of some of my neighbors was picked up and mine wasn't for several weeks, I was confused. I was flummoxed again when city crews *did* pick up my leaves one day last fall, as part of the eight loose-leaf pickups a year that all residents get, I've since learned.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who's confused. In recent weeks, huge piles of yard clippings have sprouted up all over my neighborhood and all over the city.

Matt Walton, my neighbor, was blowing leaves into a neat pile at the curb last Friday when I asked him if he had opted out of the green waste container program? "I didn't even know I had that option," he said.

"I'm a renter," Grant Cuijls, another neighbor told me. "I didn't know there was an opt-in. My landlord gets the utility bill." A huge pile of tree limbs that Cuijls had trimmed from his rented digs took up an entire block and had been baking in the sun for weeks, a serious fire hazard.

Even savvy neighbors are confused. Nancy Anton, an avid gardener, paid for the privilege of dumping her clippings in the street, but because there is little parking at the front of her house, she prefers to dump her pile on a side street next to an alley that runs behind her house. The city doesn't pick it up. Her friend across the street

places his pile at the edge of his property line. But the driver passes it up too, assuming it belongs to the house that hasn't paid for loose-leaf pickup.

And yet another acquaintance told me the city hasn't picked up his green waste for weeks. When he complained, waste officials told him they were swamped and couldn't give him even an estimate when they would get to it.

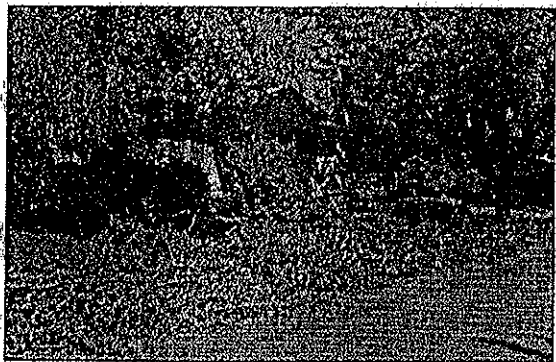
Sacramento solid waste officials say part of the problem is a staff shortage that has delayed garbage pickups in recent weeks. Loose yard clippings are the lowest priority. So, even those who, unlike me, pay extra to dump yard waste in the street aren't getting it collected.

As for the confusion, officials say they placed inserts into utility bills explaining that customers were now required to place yard clippings in green waste containers, unless they opted out of the program and paid extra. They also provided a brochure that explained about the eight loose-leaf pickups annually and gave customers a calendar of when the pickups would take place.

Earth to city: Many residents pay using automatic withdrawal programs. They don't even bother to open their utility bills. And those who do often toss the inserts.

The city of Sacramento has the highest garbage rates in the region. Service is abysmal. What happens in other jurisdictions? Watch for tomorrow's installment and find out.

- grutland@sacbee.com



Georgann Eberhardt Special to The Bee

Confusion over leaf pickup has resulted in piles of debris around the city, such as this one in Curtis Park.

5/18/11

EDITORIAL NOTEBOOK | Ginger Rutland

# If City Hall can't fix leaf debris, what can it fix?

## Part 2 of 2

**F**or me, leaf pickup in Sacramento is like snow removal in Chicago. It's one of those essential and basic services. When a municipality can't get that right, something's really wrong.

Here, huge piles of yard clippings are stacking up all over the city.

What happens in neighboring jurisdictions? Most cities contract out for solid waste services, including green waste pickup. Each city's contract is a little different but, unlike Sacramento, Rancho Cordova, Citrus Heights and Elk Grove don't allow residents to dump yard clippings in the street.

That's Sacramento's biggest problem - inconsistency. Some residents pay for loose leaf pickup and some don't. Those who don't sometimes dump their clippings on the piles of their neighbors who do pay.

The city of Davis still provides loose leaf pickup in the street for all residents, as Sacramento once did. The policy irks bicyclists who find the piles hazardous, but the policy is clear. Davis' private waste hauler also charges a lot

less - \$28.87 per month vs. \$34.48 for Sacramento.

Sacramento needs to decide whether it will provide loose-in-the-street pickup for all residents or for none. Because voters approved an ordinance in 1977 that required the city to offer loose leaf pickup to those who want it, a change eliminating the service entirely would require a new vote.

I say, let the balloting begin.

Another question - why is Sacramento's bad service so costly? For one thing, the City Council mandated weekly recycling in 2004 - a mistake. The city could reduce costs by offering recycling every other week as other local jurisdictions do.

Finally, two independent audits - one last year, another this year - have recommended that Sacramento consider putting its solid waste services out for bid to a private contractor. The council should explore that option too.

The yard clippings piling up across Sacramento city and exorbitant garbage bills are a test of municipal governance. If politicians can't fix this, why should they remain in office?

- grutland@sacbee.com