

Waste not

St. Paul neighbors who share an alley save money and the environment by agreeing to use same trash hauler

by Kevin Driscoll

There are 64 licensed garbage haulers operating in St. Paul, and some weeks it seems that a dozen of them are driving down many of the alleys in town.

"I used to see five or six different companies' trucks going down our alley in just one day, some of them to pick up only one customer's trash," said Todd Seabury-Kolod of Macalester-Groveland. "The number seemed to grow over the years as new neighbors moved in."

Seabury-Kolod was struck by the inefficiency of such a system—in diesel fuel, in wear and tear on the alley and in noise and air pollution. "I've thought about trash all my life," he said. "I was on (former St. Paul Mayor) Jim Scheibel's Solid Waste Task Force back in the early 1990s that looked at organizing St. Paul's trash collection system."

When Seabury-Kolod saw an ad from a local trash hauler earlier this year offering discounts to residential customers if a certain percentage of their neighbors also contracted for its services, he went door to door on his Princeton Avenue block.

"The more people on the block who agreed to go with the hauler, the less expensive it would be for all of us," he said. "I sent mailings to all of my neighbors, and we signed up over 80 percent (21 of 24 homes). That brought the maximum discount—about \$4.00 a month for each of us—and we have a lot more quiet around here now."

Seabury-Kolod is now working on signing up the adjacent block, where as of late October no less than six private trash haulers were operating. And he isn't alone. David Pasiuk, a member of the Macalester-Groveland Community Council's Transportation Committee, said his group is pulling together a plan to seek bids from various local trash haulers to service portions of that entire neighborhood. "The idea is to get competing companies to agree to one overall contract to pick up trash

in the area," he said. "It's pretty crazy right now. Some haulers send their trucks down the same alley two or three days a week."

The Hamline-Midway Coalition has also been encouraging its residents to organize their blocks to use the same hauler, according to community organizer Linda Winsor. A year ago, Winsor convinced about 21 of the 25 homeowners on her own block in Summit Hill to use the same hauler in order to reduce truck traffic and get a reduced rate. She has since researched the independent trash haulers operating in Hamline-Midway and will be offering that information to local residents along with sample flyers that they can distribute to their neighbors.

The city of St. Paul has had some form of organized trash collection in the past, but "not since the late 1970s," according to Bob Kessler, the director of the city's Department of License, Inspections and Environmental Protection. "It was sort of a dual system of public and private haulers with a combined billing system," he said. "There was an attempt back then to reorganize the system, but it didn't go anywhere."

In the late 1970s and early '80s, the former Southwest Area District Council considered organizing trash collection in the Highland and Macalester-Groveland neighborhoods, but it never went anywhere, according to Gayle Summers, the former community organizer for that group and now the organizer for the Highland District Council. Summers said they discovered that "people have an unnatural attachment to their garbage haulers."

Shortly thereafter, a neighborhood association in the Tangletown area of Macalester-Groveland convinced 70 to 80 percent of the neighbors there to contract with a single hauler, according to longtime resident Eric Watkins. However, the small company they contracted with was later purchased by a larger company, and now there are at least three haulers operating on his block, Watkins said.



Todd Seabury-Kolod convinced 21 of 24 homeowners on his block to use the same trash hauler in an effort to reduce truck traffic in the alley. Photo by Brad Stauffer.

The city's Solid Waste Task Force tried again in the early 1990s, "but when residents were asked if they wanted to go to a city pickup system or keep their private hauler, they picked private," Kessler said.

Seabury-Kolod, Winsor and their neighbors contract with Ken Berquist & Son, a company with 11 full- and part-time employees, four rear-loading trucks for residential service and three dumpster roll-offs for commercial customers. Jim Berquist, who owns the firm that was started by his father in 1930, said he began offering the discounted block rates as a way to survive in "a cutthroat business." The competition is "very tough," he said. "We're really just treading water. The bigs are dominating and dictating the business in St. Paul."

The "bigs" are national and multinational corporations that through mergers and acquisitions have moved into the Twin Cities market over the past quarter-century. They include BFI/Allied Waste Services, a consortium of 304 companies with 10 million customers nationwide; Utah-based Waste Management Systems; and Veolia, a French company that recently purchased Onyx and Superior and now has more than 270,000 employees worldwide.

According to Berquist, the big trash haulers do mass mailings offering 50 percent discounts to new customers. "They lure them in with the discount, make them sign a one-year contract and then jack the price up," he said. "We don't do that, and neither do most other small haulers, because we can't. The margin is

so thin already."

One reason Seabury-Kolod contracts with Berquist is because that company recycles its trash at the Resource Recovery Facility (RRF) in Newport, which is operated by Ramsey and Washington counties. Berquist and 37 other haulers in St. Paul are either fully or partially committed to bringing their trash to the RRF, which turns the trash into fuel that is shipped to Xcel Energy plants in Red Wing and Mankato and burned for energy.

According to the RRF Web site, about 70 percent of the more than 400,000 tons of waste it receives annually is processed into fuel, providing about 700,000 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power about 30,000 homes for a year. Three percent of the waste is ferrous metals, which are also recycled, and about 20 percent goes to landfills.

Though most St. Paul haulers have contracted with the RRF, they are not required to, and some of the larger haulers operate their own landfills in and out of the state. Some haulers find it more economical to ship their garbage to distant landfills than take the garbage to a refuse-derived fuel facility like the RRF, according to a recent report by the Minnesota state legislative auditor. The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that hauling trash is interstate commerce, and that any state or local laws stipulating where trash must be taken are unconstitutional. Still, the situation is better than it was. As recently as 20 years ago, 95 percent of the trash in Ramsey County was buried in landfills.

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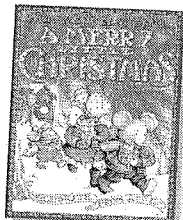


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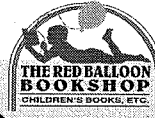
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