

Removing waste alley by alley by LAURA YUEN

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(Photo and caption: 'Garbage Hauler Jim Berquist, photographed hard at work Thursday, services almost every house along the alley behind Princeton Avenue between Prior and Kenneth, thanks to help from customer Todd Seabury-Kolod, who persuaded his neighbors to contract with Berquist to reduce the number of garbage trucks lumbering down their alley.' CRAIG BORCK, Pioneer Press)

Todd Seabury-Kolod's revolution is only two blocks long. But his victory is easy to see: Lining the alley are rows of identical trash bins—most bearing the same garbage hauler's name. Before Seabury-Kolod's crusade, trucks from seven haulers barreled through his alley in Macalester-Groveland. A similar ruckus plagues countless blocks throughout cities that require homeowners to choose their own collector. "Everyone has wondered why there were so many haulers going down one alley, but they didn't think they could do anything about it," Seabury-Kolod said. "I didn't think I could, either." The father of two decided to make trash his calling. Through leaflets, phone calls and over-the-fence chats, Seabury-Kolod persuaded 22 out of 24 families on his block to go with one local hauler. One block over, he won over 17 out of 20 households. For most of his neighbors, it was an easy sell: Support a mom-and-pop business. Cut down on diesel fuel. And make the alley quieter.

Throughout St. Paul, pockets of neighbors are banding together in a small but growing movement to reduce the number of haulers in their alleys. City and county officials say this kind of block activism, rather than new regulation, is the best way to change hauling practices. "That's the way to do it," said Bob Kessler, director of the city's license, inspections and environmental protection. "Otherwise, it becomes such a volatile, political issue." Any attempt to legislate garbage collection typically erupts into a war among government, the industry and homeowners who cherish their right to hire and fire their own haulers.

Zack Hansen remembers, just a few years ago, several thousand homeowners mailed postcards to Ramsey and Washington counties fighting a proposal to pursue public trash collection. Industry groups coordinated the campaign. "I've been in this business 20 years, and it still baffles me. It's one of the most politically intense discussions communities will have," said Hansen, manager of environmental health for Ramsey County. "The industry will fiercely fight it, and the communities get caught in the middle."

But as cities grow, the overabundance of garbage collectors presents its own kind of nuisance, officials say. In St. Paul, homeowners can choose from 21 residential haulers. Allowing homeowners to pick their own hauler doesn't translate into cleaner alleys, Kessler said. The city receives more than 15,000 complaints a year about alley trash. Unlike Minneapolis, which provides garbage collection as a city service, St. Paul can't track which property owners are failing to sign up for private collection, Kessler said. Most homeowners in Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties hire their own garbage collector. St. Paul used to provide city hauling service but got out of the business in the late 1970s, in part because of escalating equipment costs.

Linda Winsor rallied her St. Paul neighbors to sign up with a single hauler a couple years ago. At the time, the idea seemed radical. Even small local companies said it would never work, citing homeowner loyalty to their hauler. "I told them, 'I think the public is ready,'" said Winsor, who has begun sharing her model with residents in the Hamline-Midway community, where she works as an organizer. "People are really learning how they can affect the environment with little decisions. What are you willing to live with—more and more landfills, and more and more trucks traversing the city?" Like Seabury-Kolod and his neighbors, Winsor's block in Summit Hill chose hauler Jim Berquist, whose father founded the Ken Berquist and Son hauling service in 1930. Winsor was keen on her criteria: The firm had to be locally owned and bring all of its waste to the Newport resource-recovery center, which sorts the trash and sends it elsewhere to be burned and converted into electricity.

As a bonus, Berquist, like a handful of other haulers, offers special "block rates." The company still charges a few dollars more than some national companies, which tend to provide basic pickup services for less. Some of the holdouts are folks who still feel loyal to their haulers, even as industry giants have bought out many of the little guys in recent decades. Doug Carnival, counsel for the Minnesota chapter of the National Solid Waste's Management Association, said his group does not oppose any approach to choosing a single hauler, as long as the movement is voluntary and organized by individuals. Still, he cautioned, "Just because someone is local doesn't mean you'll get the right price, the best service or delivery of waste" to the Newport resource-recovery center. The world's largest hauler, Waste Management, transports all of its trash to the Newport facility rather than private landfills. The other two industry giants, Allied Waste and Veolia, only send a portion.

Mary Jonas, who lives down the block from Seabury-Kolod, said she never met her neighbor until he started to drop by with letters about trash service. She recently decided to switch from Waste Management to Berquist, mostly to support his cause. "I'm someone who appreciates a mission, and that's Todd," Jonas said. That gives Seabury-Kolod hope. He's taking his garbage crusade to block No. 3.

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TALKING TRASH

Linda Winsor, a community organizer for the Hamline-Midway Coalition, suggests the following steps to consolidate alley trash pickup:

- Talk to your neighbors to see if they would be interested in organizing for fewer garbage trucks on your block; ask if they would recommend a garbage hauler.
- Call haulers about block discounts and conditions. If it's important to you, ask where they take their garbage.
- Choose a hauler that meets your criteria. Some neighbors, for example, prefer that the hauler is locally owned and brings all of its trash to the Newport resource-recovery center.
- Distribute flyers to your neighbors and continue to check in on them.
- Sign up neighbors who want to participate. Make a list of names, addresses and contact information.
- Contact your hauler and provide the contact list.

-Laura Yuen