

St. Paul neighbors unite to reduce number of trash haulers

By CHRIS HAVENS • 651-298-1542, Star Tribune Last update: June 24, 2008 - 11:32 PM

Todd Seabury-Kolod is a man who can appreciate small victories. Just recently, he helped convert an entire city block in the Mac/Groveland neighborhood to his belief that one trash hauler is the best way to go. In St. Paul, residents have their choice of who they want picking up their garbage. Seabury-Kolod is all for competition, but he doesn't like several different trucks rumbling through the neighborhood on different days. He started a back-fence revolution more than a year ago with conversations, leaflets and door-knocking. Now, it looks like his idea might be catching on, for a few blocks at least. Folks in other neighborhoods around St. Paul -- from Battle Creek to Highland Park -- are also in line with his thinking.

The reasons to organize a group of neighbors around one hauler vary from causing less wear and tear on alleys and roads to reducing emissions to supporting small businesses. Some companies offer discounts to large groups of customers. There are 55 licensed trash haulers in St. Paul, and about 20 serve residential customers, according to the Public Works Department. They range from large multinational companies to small local firms.

The city has looked at going with one citywide hauler in the past, but the idea hasn't caught on in recent decades. People like having the freedom to choose their hauler, there's the theory that competition breeds lower prices and the industry has fought against it, said Zack Hansen, Ramsey County environmental health director. Some metro cities contract with one company to haul trash, others maintain competition but designate zones or specific pickup days when trucks can be on the streets.

"This is one of the most contentious issues municipalities face," Hansen said. Five cities in the county decide who collects garbage, he said. "In the bigger picture, St. Paul's system is really silly and so inefficient," said Charles Hathaway, a Highland Park resident who has used alley cleanup days to talk to his neighbors about going with one hauler. So far, he said, 36 of 43 neighbors are signed up with one company.

On Seabury-Kolod's block, the alley between Princeton and Sargent Avenues and Kenneth and Prior Streets, 23 of 24 households have switched to one hauler. The next block west is 100 percent committed to one company, and he's got about half of the next block convinced. "Generally, people are very supportive and rooting for the process to succeed," Seabury-Kolod said.

City Council Member Russ Stark, who represents the Fourth Ward, said he has no intention of introducing a change to the city's current system. But he's supportive of the neighborhood-generated efforts. "I think it's definitely a positive thing for the community to be doing," he said. Aside from reducing the number of trucks going down alleys, he said, it's a good opportunity for neighbors to get to know one another.

Some district planning councils have offered help to residents who are interested in getting their blocks to unite. "It's an idea people find appealing, but it's also a lot of work to get everyone on the block organized," said Michael Jon Olson, executive director of the Hamline-Midway Coalition. He said there hasn't been much follow-through.

Greg Blees, an East Side resident and former city employee, did a survey and found there are six different haulers on five different days serving the 70 houses in his Battle Creek neighborhood. He wants to get his neighbors to rally around a single trash pickup day, but not necessarily one single hauler. He has informally suggested a system that would rank haulers by how environmentally friendly they are, by lowest cost and by a combination of the two factors. Then residents could choose whether they wanted low-cost or more-green companies to take their trash. But regardless of who people chose, the companies could only pick up on the same day. If he could get it to work in his neighborhood, Blees said he'd like to see if it could work citywide.