

Garbage for thought: The benefits of universal coverage

BY STEVE BOLAND

We have a private trash hauling system in St. Paul. From what I read in the newspapers, there are more than a dozen private residential trash haulers barreling down the streets and alleys of our fair city to remove the unusable stuff in our lives. More civilized places tend to have one truck doing this work. However, the St. Paul City Council recently commissioned a study about whether there's a better way to haul trash. Here's where some interesting parallels to health care can be uncovered.

People with money have coverage. If you're well off, you have health insurance and maybe think of the rest of us as annoying for whining all the time that we either pay way too much for it (as in the case of my family with no employer-based coverage and with people who actually have to see a doctor on occasion) or we can't get it at all.

It's the same thing with garbage collection. When the system is voluntary and based on private haulers, people with money call someone and get it taken care of and can't imagine why some people who don't have money don't have a private hauler taking away their garbage. People without coverage hurt the rest of the system.

Let's assume you're one of those folks who can't—or, yes, in some cases won't—pay

for private garbage hauling. Maybe you've spent every last dime on medical bills. In any case, you don't have \$20 per month or more to pay for hauling. So you maybe slip your garbage in with your neighbors' and hope they don't notice. Or perhaps you take a trash bag with you when you leave the house and walk by the Dumpster at the local church and pitch it in. (After all, it's a church: Aren't they supposed to relieve you of your sins?) Or maybe, just maybe, it gets really bad and you simply leave the stuff in the alley and hope for the best. If so, feral cats or squirrels or whatever are going to open the bags, and now your old garbage is floating on the breeze into your neighbors' yard, the streets or the sewers and so into the Mississippi River.

Private interests are vested in making money from the current system, so we don't get change. Yes, some of these people making money from the current system are family businesses and they smile at you and they're not vampires. I get it. However, is the benefit those people receive a good trade-off for the problems we have in the current system?

People who want to solve this problem are labeled as promoters of "big government" taking away "our freedoms." Personally, I don't much care about the freedom to pick a garbage hauler. Sure, some people will lose some choice here, but is it enough of an issue

to derail solving the problem? Is it more important than stopping free riders from making churches pay for their dumping or letting their trash blow into our streets?

People without money need more from the system than those with money. I've been poor. Not abjectly poor and not for long periods, but I've maxed out a gas station credit card (the only credit card I had then) just so I could eat. Yes, I charged groceries at an Amoco station because that was the only way I was going to get them. But I digress.

My point is, when you're poor, you work with what you have. You take donated furniture and electronics. You buy second-hand clothes. If you buy new, you're buying cheap from discount stores. You know what happens to this stuff? It wears out—fast. Then you have to dispose of it. And guess what? That costs money. Sort of like people without health insurance trying to get by on the cheap until their bodies break down, and then it gets expensive—fast.

So, City Council members and my fellow St. Paulites, let's consider these issues and get some more facts. Then perhaps we'll see if universal coverage makes sense in a much smaller universe than just health care.

Steve Boland lives in Summit-University and is a former executive director of the Summit University Planning Council.

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attended two Macalester-Groveland Community Council meetings on the proposed Jefferson Avenue bike boulevard, I have not heard a credible reason why this would not also be the case on Jefferson. I look forward to the day I can leave my front yard and take my three young daughters safely on our bikes to Mattocks Park, Blondie's Cafe or the Edgcombe Recreation Center via the Jefferson bikeway.

the same way I do. The bigger the jet the better. So here's a message to the Metropolitan Airports Commission: Take as long as you like reconstructing the north parallel runway. You've got no complaints here.

*Steve Nayman
West End*

Reform begins at the polls

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