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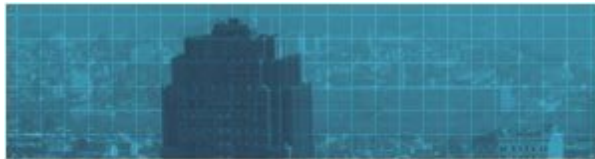
Gas prices push up trash hauling fees

Fuel and other factors causing large cost hikes for area residents.

By Tom Coombe
Of The Morning Call

Think it costs a lot to put gas in your car these days?

Your garbageman apparently has the same problem.



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Trash haulers say rising fuel costs have led them to charge more for municipal waste collection this year. In turn, municipalities have had to raise the fees residents and property owners pay each year for trash pickup by, in some instances, more than 100 percent.

But high gas prices aren't the only reason trash bills have gone up. As municipalities renewed their 2004 and 2005 garbage contracts, they found themselves paying for other things that had changed since the old contracts began: higher insurance costs, new government regulations, more expensive equipment.

"Looking at other municipalities, we recognized our rates would probably be similar," said Bernie Rodgers, borough manager in Bangor, where trash bills could more than double next year. "It's regrettable, but the handwriting was

sort of on the wall."

Bangor residents — who had been paying \$150 a year under the current five-year contract with Waste Management Inc. — will pay anywhere from \$300 to \$340 a year under the borough's new contract, which begins in January. Bangor's Municipal Authority is expected to determine an exact figure by the end of December.

Many communities take out three-, four- or five-year contracts with trash companies. The companies say a lot has happened in the years since their clients signed the now-expiring contracts.

"If you bought a product and used it, and then [went] out to buy one five or six years later, the price isn't going to be the same," said Eric Pavlak, director of communications for J.P. Mascaro & Sons, a Montgomery County trash hauler that serves several eastern Pennsylvania communities, including Catasauqua, Northampton, and East Stroudsburg.

Pavlak said Mascaro's fuel costs have doubled, and that higher oil prices have hurt the industry all around. For example, the plastic liners landfills use to keep trash in are petroleum-based. If a company is paying more to line its landfill, it needs to charge more to accept trash.

"Clearly, fuel costs are a big piece of it," said Mary Webber, a spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Waste Industry Association. She said no matter where they're from, trash haulers mention the price of fuel first when asked about costs.

"You had to make adjustments last year, but this year it's a significant change," said Harry Smith, spokesman for Waste Management's Grand Central Sanitary Landfill in Plainfield Township.

But what about 2004, when gas prices were relatively lower? Webber said there's another factor at work here: the

state's Growing Greener law. A provision of the law passed in summer 2002 charges landfills \$4 for every ton of trash they take in. That fee could add up to \$3.2 million a year for a landfill like Grand Central, which collects about 800,000 tons of trash annually.

Smith said there are other government provisions that affect cost. For example, new regulations by the U.S. Department of Transportation have shortened the number of hours a driver can be on the road. Smith said that means trash companies need more workers on duty to keep garbage pickups steady.

"A route that normally took two trucks now takes three trucks to complete," he said.

All of that has left municipalities looking for ways to lower costs the next time they rebid their trash contracts.

One way is to show trash haulers that the amount of garbage they picked up from a municipality during the previous contract has gone down. That's according to Eugene Goldfeder, borough manager in Catasauqua, where annual trash bills will go from \$217.50 to \$300 next year.

It's possible Catasauqua could boost its recycling efforts. Of course, recycling costs would go up, but it would at least keep materials out of landfills and in circulation, Goldfeder said.

The borough had looked at reducing its twice-weekly trash service to once a week, but ultimately rejected the idea, he said. Catasauqua wouldn't save that much money, and residents would have the inconvenience of trash piled up on sidewalks.

Getting the best rate possible can help soften the blow, said Rodger Danielson, borough manager in Palmerton, which raised its garbage rates from \$168 to \$264 last year.

"Certainly, nobody approved," he said. "It's kind of like, 'What can you do?' You need the service."