

The dump dilemma: City, county wrangle over landfill costs; City eliminates cost-saving cards

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City residents can no longer obtain a cost-saving pass to use the Douglas landfill, but county residents can.

In previous years, the Douglas City Council subsidized a punch card to allow residents 12 free trips to the landfill per year. As part of its 2011 fiscal year budget, passed July 1, the city council passed a resolution to end the use of the punch cards because it was not a cost-effective practice, Interim City Administrator Forrest Neuerburg said.

The move came as a surprise to Converse County commissioners.

"If somebody thought that idea, they should have come to our budget meetings and told us that because we didn't budget for everybody buying a pass," County Commission Chairman Ed Werner said. "My understanding was (the landfill) was a part of their bill, so effectively, the city residents were paying for (punch cards) and that right got taken away from city residents but that bill didn't go down,"

City residents now pay \$12 per truck load, \$6 per car load and \$63 per ton for large loads to use the landfill. A no-discount pass is still available for \$60 that provides five trips.

In order to aid rising operational costs and to help offset county resident use of the landfill, Neuerburg requested \$291,600 from the Converse County commission. The commission approved \$102,000. The county provided \$90,000 in funding last year.

"The city did request that the county provide funding for the landfill itself for its operations, and they did not choose to do that," Neuerburg said. "What they did choose to do, is become a retail customer and buy landfill cards from the city."

It costs the city of Douglas about \$800,000 a year to operate the landfill. Werner said he was unhappy that no city council members were present during the funding request to the county.

"Nobody came to our budget sessions and said, 'Will you budget for the extra money because we aren't going to be able to do it and we are asking if you could.' At least make the request. Don't wait until after the budget is in stone and then turn around and throw stones at us," Werner said. "I would have expected personally that the council would have made a more (stronger) plea for assistance, rather than sending just one staff person to the county commissioner meeting when we were doing budgets to make this request."

Of the county's \$102,000, \$90,000 is reserved to buy punch cards from the city to sell to county residents. The county commission will buy punch cards from the city at a cost of \$144 per card and sell them to county residents at \$20 per card. Proof of a county residence must be provided at the county clerk's office upon purchase. Revenue from card sales will be recycled back into the fund to purchase additional cards. The practice was started three years ago to incentivize county residents to use the landfill instead of unapproved dump locations.

"We did make them only available to county residents because city residents already were paying for it and got their own dump pass through the city," Werner said.

The other \$12,000 in funding is to offset the cost of county residents illegally dumping garbage in city dumpsters.

Werner said the county commissioners were unaware the city would be ending their punch cards when they created their budget. Because the monies were specifically budgeted to cover rural needs, city residents are unable to purchase county landfill cards from the County Clerk's office.

"Our intent was not to discriminate. Our intent was to help the city out by providing this additional funding for the landfill," Werner said.

Consequently, rural residents are being subsidized to use the city landfill, increasing operational costs to the city.

"You pay a limited amount of money to have your garbage picked up and dealt with at the landfill and that doesn't cover the cost of doing it," Neuerburg said. "So if you gave somebody a punch card with 12 punches on it, each one worth \$12, basically a pickup load to get it. You are picking up their trash and disposing of it and then letting them have a free service to put additional trash in the landfill."

At its July 26 meeting, members of the city council discussed solutions to the current problem.

"It is everyone's landfill and everyone uses the landfill and everyone needs to pay their fair share to use the landfill," Councilman Val Marshall said. "It is not just the city's problem, it is also the county's problem, and we need to figure out a way to make it equitable and fair to everyone."

"Our obligation is to the city, to make sure that we have a landfill for the city," Councilman Bob Chiapuzio said. "That would be my next step, to ask the council to see if we need to restrict (landfill use) to just the city. We need to get some help."

Werner watched some of the city council meeting on television and was not pleased with what he was hearing.

"I am getting sick and tired of Mr. Chiapuzio and his mouth, basically blaming the county for all of their problems and going on and on. I caught parts of (the July 26 city council meeting) and to be quite blunt, I was rather disgusted by his ranting and raving. They point a (heck) of a lot of fingers and blame it on us and yet, have never actually come and sat down and talked with us."

Mayor Marilyn Werner, Ed Werner's mother, suggested the city council sit down with the county commissioners in the near future to discuss the problem. It was eventually decided to invite the county commission to the Aug. 9 council work study session.

"It is about time that we started a conversation instead of them airing all their problems in the public and pointing fingers instead of actually talking to us first," Ed Werner said. "There has been ample opportunity, clear back to the budget session that we could have been meeting and talking about things and not had to call special work sessions."

Currently, the landfill is estimated to last until 2013 or 2014. The city needs to have a plan to the Department of Environmental Quality by April 2011 with a decision on whether they will build a new pit or haul waste to another city.

A new landfill that complies with all Wyoming DEQ standards would cost the city of Douglas an estimated \$5-7 million. On April 13, 2009, the city council voted to continue use of the landfill instead of hauling waste to Casper.