

Trash bill hike has customers shaking heads

*By Martin Reed
Staff Writer*

When Pavillion's Dixie Carnes opened her latest Wyoming Waste Systems bill for her home trash collection this week, she noticed a \$22.66 increase in the monthly charge.

"I was stunned because I thought, 'Didn't I pay last month's bill?' There was no explanation," Carnes said about the jump in her bill to \$58.26 from \$36.60.

Carnes learned the company's increase resulted from Fremont County Solid Waste Disposal District's plan to impose fees at the landfills. But the reason upset her even more because the landfill fees will not start until Nov. 1 at the earliest.

"How could they do it?" Carnes said about Wyoming Waste increasing its fees. "They don't even have the system in place (for charging fees at the county's dumps). I got right on the phone and called" the company.

Carnes is one of possibly hundreds of concerned county customers who have called Wyoming Waste Systems about their fee increases of 40 percent and more in their bills.

Lander City Council member John Boulette is urging the company's customers in the county to call and demand a refund of the excess charge.

"Right now, my main concern is the people who are being overcharged ... and don't make the phone call to get the overcharge refunded," Boulette said.

While some are complaining about the rate hike, others are taking matters into their own hands.

"My reaction was that I will take care of my own garbage. That means we drop the service," said county commissioner Dennis Christensen, whose bill jumped to nearly \$50 monthly from about \$33.

Wyoming Waste Systems pointed to county solid waste officials for the rate hike — even if it is earlier than the fees beginning at the landfills.

"The landfill went up from nothing basically to \$80 a ton. That's a huge increase," said Brad Hegwer, the company's site manager. "That's actually more than what Teton County, Jackson area, pays and they have to haul it from Jackson to Big Piney."

The rate hike is based on the company's projected cost of hauling trash to the landfills.

"They were taken off of averages throughout the state on what our other districts run," Hegwer said. The company examined "their averages for residential per yard for Dumpsters and that's how those rates were arrived at."

Raising rates

Because the county's landfills will charge for dumping trash, the company had to raise its rates to accommodate the increase, Hegwer said.

"It's not us doing it. It's basically a pass-through amount," he said. "If they want to complain about the increase they should probably talk to somebody with the landfill."

Hegwer said the rate increase happened before the landfills imposed their fees because the solid waste district shifted its last start date of Oct. 1.

"By the time they changed their mind and put it in the paper it was too late, we couldn't stop it," he said about the company's rate increase, which takes about a month to program into their billing system.

"We've got people that are doing nothing but answering phones and trying to deal with this situation," he said. "I just wish they could narrow the date down a little more."

Although the county solid waste district recently announced a Nov. 1 start date for fees at the landfills and trash transfer stations, it may not happen as soon as expected.

"We're trying to, but in my opinion it's too early. My estimate is we won't be ready," district superintendent Don Connell said. "We're doing all we can. I think we're into some overtime situations to keep it going. Of course, the weather's not cooperating."

With the suggestion that Wyoming Waste Systems officials could call the district for updates on when the fees would start, Connell agreed.

"I wish I had a crystal ball and I could tell them but I don't," he said.

The City of Riverton increased its rates for trash collection by about 30 percent in August, to \$25.25 from the previous price of \$18.39 per month. The city's rate increase was effective for the Oct. 1 billing cycle. City administrator Carter Napier said the municipality has fielded numerous calls concerning the rate increase.

"We've certainly got a lot of questions about it from the public and a lot of the questions about whether or not this would be all the rate hikes," Napier said. "I'm sure there has been negative comments about it." For Wyoming Waste Systems, it seems the complaints are more vocal because they are affecting more individuals in the county. And the company's rate hikes are not just affecting private residences, but also government agencies.

"We're seeing increases of 60 percent to 65 percent," said Travis Sweeney, business manager for Fremont County School District 6 at Wind River, where the last monthly bill was about \$444 compared to the new amount of \$730.

"We certainly would have to sit and discuss it. It is a huge increase," Sweeney said. "My question is, what's the justification? I'd like to see some documentation for such a huge increase." He added, "I will definitely be giving them a call today."

Charri Lara, treasurer for the City of Lander, said the municipality's latest monthly bill from Wyoming Waste Systems jumped to \$615.55 from \$387.14.

"I put a call into them and they didn't return my call ... so we'll see what they do," Lara said. A group of city officials and others met last Tuesday, Oct. 6, to discuss ways to increase recycling and limit the impact of the rising trash rates.

"It's going to put the hurt on a lot of people. We're dreading this," Lara said. "That's why we're trying to organize a game plan because we're going to see a lot more trash dumped a lot of places. We're going to see a lot more theft of services."

Boulette said he wants to figure out a plan for a new recycling container somewhere in Lander to replace the one that had been at the Mr. D's parking lot.

"We just need to find some land here in Lander where we could do it," he said. "There are many Lander citizens that want to recycle but we don't have the type of (curbside pickup) program that Riverton has." Lander officials are looking at steps to limit the garbage placed into the city's receptacles.

"We're going to try to conserve and recycle what we can and hopefully put locks on our Dumpsters because they're kind of open season for a lot of people," Boulette said.

Christensen said he would like to see a funding solution for the solid waste district's woes. "As a commissioner, my ears are open. I haven't heard a whole lot of suggestions to fix the problem. All I've heard is complaints," he said.

One possible solution may be to enact an extra sales tax in the county to pay for the increasing trash costs, Christensen said. The problem is what will happen in the meantime.

"We spent a long time in this county trying to clean up illegal dump sites and they were a mess for a long time and they continue to be a problem, and I think we've just exacerbated that," he said.

Hegwer said Wyoming Waste Systems is adjusting the market costs in Fremont County.

"It's just a bad situation that we tried to avoid," he said. "I just want people to know we're victims here just like everybody else and it's not something we tried to do."