



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

City of Seattle Office of City Auditor

April 19, 2011

City of Seattle Anti-Litter Efforts

Why We Did This Audit

In February 2010, Seattle City Councilmembers Tim Burgess and Tom Rasmussen asked the City Auditor to assess the sufficiency of Seattle's graffiti and litter laws, examine best practices for dealing with these two issues, and develop recommendations for reducing and preventing graffiti and litter. They were concerned that the presence of physical disorder such as graffiti and litter contributes to the incidence of crime. First, we completed our review of the City's anti-graffiti efforts, which was published in July 2010. We then applied what we learned from our work on the graffiti audit to this review of street/ground litter in an urban environment.

What We Did

- We examined the City's litter laws, enforcement rates, and what it does to reduce and prevent litter in public spaces such as sidewalks, streets, and parks.
- We researched other jurisdictions' successful litter laws and innovative efforts to abate litter; and
- We developed recommendations for improving Seattle's anti-litter efforts.

A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report can be obtained at our web site: <http://www.seattle.gov/audit/> or by calling (206)-233-3801.

What We Learned

- In 2009, the City of Seattle (City) spent approximately \$8.2 million on programs that deal with street/ground litter.
- The City has litter programs and activities in a number of departments, including: Seattle Public Utilities (SPU), Parks and Recreation, Transportation, Finance and Administration, Neighborhoods, and the Seattle Municipal Court. Most City litter programs operate effectively with little interdepartmental coordination required.
- The City has not established litter baseline statistics or trends to measure how City or private sector programs are performing either over time or in comparison to other jurisdictions.
- The City has laws against littering and accumulation of solid waste but they are rarely enforced.
- Except for hazardous substances or litter that is an immediate threat to the health or safety of the public, City law is silent on responsibility for the removal of solid waste in amounts equal to or less than one cubic foot by property owners on their properties and adjacent rights-of-way.
- The City's litter and solid waste laws address litter from a public health or safety perspective (e.g., whether the waste contains hazardous substances or not), and do not address litter from a visual-disorder or cleanliness standpoint. Other jurisdictions, such as Austin, Denver, San Francisco, New York City, and Washington D.C., have laws that address the removal of litter from a visual-disorder or cleanliness standpoint.
- City departments are proactive in piloting and implementing innovative technologies and approaches to dealing with litter. For example, since about 2000, the Parks Department has piloted the following programs and technologies to deal with litter in City parks: Pack-It-In/Pack-It-Out Program, Big Belly Solar-Powered Compactor Litter Cans, In-ground Litter Cans, and with SPU, the Open Space Outdoor Recycling Program. Parks has also been examining approaches to integrating litter collection with its other maintenance activities, e.g., performing litter collection while conducting mowing and landscaping activities.

Our work on graffiti and litter led us to a growing body of academic research evidence in the field of criminology that suggests that efforts focused on very small (e.g., one city block) discrete "hot spots" of crime and disorder can be effective in reducing crime and disorder in those areas. We address the key components of this approach in a separate report, ["Addressing Crime and Disorder in Seattle "Hot Spots": What Works?"](#)

Our Recommendations

Given the current budget constraints facing the City of Seattle, we developed several recommendations that have potential for cost recovery or additional revenue for the City.

Recommendation #1:

If the City Council wishes to provide the City with the means to require property owners to clean-up and remove all litter that accumulates on their own property and adjacent rights-of-way, not only from a public safety standpoint but also from a visual disorder or cleanliness standpoint, they should consider working with the Law Department to modify Seattle Municipal Code 21.36.425A and B to replace the reference to one cubic foot (a volume standard) with a qualitative standard such as “unsightly” or “unsanitary”. The modification should also require some kind of notice to the owner that a violation exists, along with time to correct the violation.

Recommendation #2

The City should work with Metro Transit to develop a plan for ensuring the continued availability of litter receptacles at bus stops when bus shelters are removed.

Recommendation #3

To help offset the cost of litter and garbage collection and disposal in parks, the City should consider whether it makes sense to establish fees for specific parks users who are directly responsible for generating the waste.

Recommendation #4

To potentially offset the City’s costs for street sweeping, the Seattle Department of Transportation should determine the magnitude of the costs for providing post-special event street sweeping services for free, and consider whether it makes sense to charge event organizers for this service.

Recommendation #5

The City should continue to work with its two contract solid waste haulers, CleanScapes and Waste Management, to: 1) ensure that Clear Alleys Program collections are not missed, and 2) thicker bags are used. We also recommend that Seattle Public Utilities explore solutions with their Clear Alley Program recycling contractors for the storing and pick-up of stacked, loose cardboard that can result in alley litter.

Recommendation #6

The City should consider curb-to-curb street sweeping to increase street sweeping efficiency and ticketing of illegally parked cars, which could both ensure that streets are clear and help offset the costs of this service.