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Anxiety over new trash policy

Rowhouse owners uneasy over less-frequent pickup

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The word is out and the anxiety is growing.

In neighborhoods rich and poor, black and white, neat and messy Baltimoreans are keenly aware that a decades-old, twice-a-week rhythm of their lives is about to be disrupted.

Soon the garbage trucks that pick up their trash will clatter down their streets just once a week.

Oh, another truck will come a couple of days later, but it will only take recyclables, those mostly non-offending papers, boxes, bottles and cans - not the crab shells, baby diapers, cat litter, moldy bread and bruised spinach you don't want sitting around for the week in between pickups.

"They are not clean in this area," Britney Powell said last week as she sat on her steps in Fulton Heights and vented about the impending trash buildup.

She shook her head.

The public policy reasons for the change have been articulated, at City Council hearings and in

community meetings: The new plan, which goes into effect July 14, will save the city \$7 million in desperately needed cash. It will free up more crews to clean the city's persistently filthy alleys. It will prod citizens to recycle more, a priority for Mayor Sheila Dixon, who signed the change into law last week.

Those who inhabit the leafy neighborhoods with large homes and ample storage for garbage cans have not shown a great deal of discomfort about the new collection schedule, and their council members supported the plan.

But for those living in Baltimore's tightly packed rowhouses, with little to no outdoor space, the concerns are strikingly similar: Where will trash be kept between collections? What if it starts to stink? Will we be fined for not using a can?

These are folks who live in long, narrow homes. Many applaud the doubled recycling collection. But they shudder at the thought of dragging stinky week-old trash from their postage-stamp backyards through a kitchen, then a dining room, then a living room.

"How often can you go to the dump?" asked Shirrell Montgomery, who also lives in Fulton Heights in West Baltimore and anticipates trash becoming overwhelming between collection days.

Across town the complaints echo: "We have people who cannot carry a can through their house," said Barry Glassman, president of the Butchers Hill community association.

Increasing the angst is the fact that many of the people in neighborhoods like these are in the habit of not putting their trash out on the curb in covered containers, despite a long-standing law requiring this. They say they have nowhere to keep a bulky can in a tiny house, so they use bags.

"I know it is the law," Jared Barnhart complained at a Butchers Hill community meeting last week. "But set us aside and let us do what we've always been doing."

Valentina Ukwuoma, who heads Baltimore's Bureau of Solid Waste, has some empathy for those with concerns about garbage storage. "That is a problem, I admit that," she said. Some neighborhood leaders are trying to determine if they can pay higher taxes for increased pickup.

On the touchy issue of trash cans, though, Ukwuoma sounded unmoved.

"This is a law that has been on the books forever," she said. "How do people feel when they are walking down the street and they are walking over trash bags? This does not look good."

The Dixon administration had briefly considered issuing plastic trash cans to everyone in the city - but the plan has been delayed in part after residents from neighborhoods with small alleys complained that the cans wouldn't fit. The city still hopes to distribute cans in the future, with smaller ones for densely populated, narrow-alley neighborhoods.

But, as the city listens and cajoles, officials are making something very clear to nervous

neighborhoods: Those who do not comply with new rules will be fined. If the fines aren't paid, homes can be added to the city's annual tax lien sale, a rule that's been in place since 1998.

And they will have to answer to Eric D. Booker, and he heads a unit that is one of the few parts of city government set to grow in this tight budget year.

On this particular day, Booker, the head of code enforcement, worked a full shift but still came to a 7 p.m. Butchers Hill community meeting with two of his inspectors. He has 10 inspectors now, and authorization to hire an additional 20.

"I'm the stinger," he announced. "The law says put it in a can. My job is to enforce the law."

Still, he smiles and shows a softer, I-can-be-reasonable side. "It is going to take me a long while to get to all of the places I need to be," he conceded, adding that he won't fine people on their trash days - at least initially.

Booker and another inspector, Clement Rivers Sr., drove around on a recent Thursday seeking violations and displaying their investigative techniques.

"Our usual suspects are on the corner," Booker announced, pointing to four bags of trash piled on the sidewalk in the 2100 block of McElderry St. in East Baltimore. No cans. Definitely no lids.

Booker pulled over, slipped on a pair of gloves and ripped open one of the bags. He fished for an envelope, a receipt or a catalog - anything to suggest the identity of the person who left the garbage on the corner. They found hair clippings. Looking around, Booker quickly spotted a nearby hair salon.

Bingo. It wasn't enough to issue a citation, but he plans to set up a sting later to watch for illegal dumping.

But then that softer side reappeared. He overlooked residents who had their garbage in metal cans without lids. "They are trying," Booker said.

Moving on, Booker and Rivers picked through another pile of garbage, in the middle of a sidewalk. Booker pointed out holes in the bag where rats had nibbled through the plastic looking for food. "Totally unacceptable," he said.

This time the apparent offender left mail in the garbage, but used blue magic marker to block out the address. And there were shredded documents, but the inspectors still tried to piece together the papers for an intact address.

Booker said those cited once tend to leave less evidence the next time. But his crews sometimes will use their unmarked personal cars to stake out problem areas, snap photos and then send citations. The pair pushed on to the next pile of refuse. "This one slipped up," Booker said after spotting an envelope with a name: Selena Redd on Spring Street. Back at the office, Booker's staff sent a citation to Redd for depositing trash on a sidewalk. It carries a \$50 fine.

Changes to city trash collection

- New garbage collection schedule to start July 14
- Trash will be collected one day, recycling will be a different day
- City will enforce rules that all trash must be in cans with tightly fitting lids
- Residents can put out cans 6 p.m. the night before collection day
- Trash volume will be limited to 96 gallons; recycling volume is unlimited
- City will hire 20 new code enforcement officers to write citations