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Polk County wants to charge residents more for trash collection. Here's how much

'Garbage is consistently not picked up.' County commissioner expresses frustration with county's waste collection contractors.

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With more trash coming into the landfill during the COVID pandemic, residents of unincorporated Polk County could see an increase on their waste collection tab to help dispose of it all.

But even if commissioners approve the \$10 hike to residential waste collection in September, the total bill to customers will still be less than what households in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Hillsborough and many other Florida counties pay for the service.

Currently, 147,000 Polk households pay an assessment of \$196.50 for waste collection, which is handled by two companies that work under a county contract. As part of next year's proposed budget, that fee would jump to \$206.50 per customer starting Oct 1.

Recent curbside delays draw complaints

County Commissioner Bill Braswell said he understands the need for the increase, but would like to see the waste collection contractors hired by the county through 2024 — Texas-based Waste Management and Lakeland-based FCC Environmental Services — do a better job.

The county submitted a news release on Aug. 13 asking residents to be patient through delays in curbside collection.

With recent spikes in COVID keeping employees out of the workforce, the two hauling companies are running daily routes with about 12 less truck drivers than normally scheduled, the release said. Each driver is responsible for about 1,000 to 1,200 collections on their daily route, the release says.

“We want to apologize, as we know how inconvenient this is for our residents,” Waste & Recycling Director Ana Wood said in the news release. “Please be patient as we work to serve you during this pandemic-related labor shortage. Be assured county staff and partners are working diligently to serve our customers and find solutions for these delays.”

Braswell said solutions need to come quickly.

“Those companies aren’t doing their jobs; something has got to give,” Braswell said in a phone call. “They are saying they don’t have enough employees, but garbage is consistently not picked up, whole developments are missed all the time.”

And for residents who have already experienced that frustration, “They won’t want to pay more,” Braswell said.

The county pays these companies a total of \$21.2 million as part of the contract agreement.

Charles Merkley, the regional director of operations with Lakeland-based FCC, said the company is working to get more drivers on the street.

“FCC Environmental Services Florida, like many solid waste haulers, continues to feel the pandemic pinch on the driver-shortage front,” he said in an email. “Of late, we have seen glimmers of hope with the onboarding of several new drivers in Polk County. And thankfully, we’ve been able to continue offering competitive wages and benefits to attract quality talent.”

COVID contributes to more trash at landfill, county officials say

The fee change, which will show up on tax bills, is necessary at a time when more garbage is being collected during the COVID-19 pandemic when more people have been working from home and ordering take-out, Wood told the Ledger.

With more waste arriving at the landfill — the dump collected roughly 18,000 tons from homes in June 2020 compared to 14,000 at the end of 2019 — the county needs additional revenue to dispose of it all.

For example, the county has to expand the landfill by adding new cells, which require a lot of engineering and can cost more than \$13 million to build, Wood said.

“We have to have enough money to pay for the maintenance of this (landfill) into the future,” Wood told The Ledger during a recent interview.

The fee increase, she said, is “because we, as residents, are generating more garbage. This assessment is directly tied to how much garbage we are putting out.”

The county normally sees a surge in trash collection during major storms, such as hurricanes, Wood said. This spike lasted a lot longer.

“With Covid it was totally different,” Wood said. “The line went up and didn’t come down.”

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What are other counties paying?

Polk isn’t the only Florida county asking its residents to pay more for waste collection. Orange County increased its fees by \$15 last year, bringing the total to \$245 per home.

Hillsborough County has raised its fee to customers for two consecutive years. In 2020, the rate increased by \$55. This summer, commissioners approved another hike of \$63.47, the Tampa Bay Times reported.

Hillsborough County residents, starting Oct. 1, will pay \$353.47.

Other counties also charge more per customer for waste collection. Here's a glimpse as of June 2020.

- Seminole: \$230
- Ocoee: \$252.
- Volusia: \$262
- Broward: \$270
- Osceola: \$278.65
- Palm Beach: \$419.
- Miami-Dade: \$484.

The last time Polk's waste collection fee was increased was in 2018 by \$8.

"The bottom line is our landfill has been run very well for a long time," said Commissioner Braswell. "They've made the right decisions. We accept the fact that the cost is going up."

A South Carolina native, Dustin covers Polk County government and county-wide issues. He can be reached at dwyatt@gannett.com or on Twitter @LLDustin_Wyatt.