

The Vacluse Progress Association

Established 1915

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The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Inquiry into Municipal Waste Management in NSW

We represent residents of the Vacluse and Watsons Bay districts of Woollahra Municipality, in Sydney. The Harbourside location of our district makes residents conscious of the damage that can be caused by litter. Some commentators think the economic profile of the area suggests that waste generation *per head* is higher than elsewhere; we think the enthusiasm of our residents for recycling is probably equal to or higher than that elsewhere.

The district is subject to high levels of tourist visitation throughout the year. Public areas, particularly beaches and parks and transport terminuses, are a particular problem as far as litter is concerned. There is a high level of tourist pedestrian (and vehicle) traffic about the northern end of the Vacluse peninsula at weekends and school holidays throughout the year, and on weekdays for all the non-Winter months.

Resident attitudes to Woollahra Council's waste services are typically positive, and user satisfaction as measured over time by various surveys has been consistently favourable. That said, we offer some observations on the service practicalities and the (perhaps inevitable) problems that are apparent with what is taken to be a 'good' service as a contribution to paragraph 1 of the Committee's Terms of Reference and some suggestions about how they might be addressed.

Service range: In addition to its domestic garbage service (see below), Woollahra Council provides three types of weekly *kerbside recycling* services for households in our locality. They are:-

- (i) clean paper and cardboard;
- (ii) cans made of aluminium or steel, glass (most but not all types), and bottles and packaging made of plastics types 1 – 5 inclusive; and
- (iii) garden organics (but not large scale cuttings).

Scope of recycling service: Our Association's repeated requests for expansion of the plastics recycling service to include type 6 plastics have not so far borne fruit. Given the large range of commonly used foodstuffs that are marketed in type 6 plastics, this is regrettable. It also confuses householders, who observably do not always make the distinction between type 6 and other types, and so the recycling material left for collection includes type 6 plastics too. Neighbouring councils accept type 6 plastics for recycling; we think Woollahra could too.

Plastic packaging that has no type identification for recycling is also confusing to residents, and unhelpful for waste processors. It seems common among retailers of pre-packed fresh food; there may be scope for co-operative action to have such packages labelled.

Collection methods: The kerbside collections of paper and glass/plastics/metal cans are undertaken from open crates. Especially when they are well filled, the open nature of the recycling crates leaves the contents available for dispersal in high wind conditions; to prevent dispersal, residents sometimes tie bundles of paper with string or enclose it in plastic bags, thus contaminating the material for recycling. Crate design might be improved from that viewpoint.

Windy conditions during collection often leave a trail of plastics and paper in the streets behind the respective collection vehicles. Loading systems vary, and we have no special insight as to how the situation might be improved.

Streetscape impacts: Following the reduction of the previous twice-a-week garbage service to the current once-weekly service in 2001, we think there has been an observable tendency for people to put their bins and crates out in the street much earlier than before, often on the morning of the day before the day scheduled for the collection. This may reflect a natural desire to ensure that they do not miss the services and have to wait another week to dispose of garbage that may well become offensive near a dwelling. With the four different collections occurring separately throughout the collection day, there are usually bins and crates left in the street after emptying, presumably awaiting people returning home from work. Community education about civic pride offers one way to reduce the adverse impact on the streetscape.

Even though collections are fairly punctually undertaken, the practice of putting bins and crates out early and bringing them in late means it is not unusual to see bins and crates left in the street for two full days. When they are located near tourist destinations and paths, these “private” bins and crates tend to serve purposes usually served by public litter bins. However, that practice also results in ‘contamination’ of pre-sorted contents, which directly affects the recyclable recovery rate. We also note that pollution of garden organics bins by plastics etc is inimical to the composting process, and pollution of paper crates by glass is highly inimical to the commerciality of the enterprise. It is likely to be impractical to require collectors to return bins and crates to a point within property boundaries.

Waste storage at home: In a long-established area like ours, much of the house and flat stock reflects design standards of earlier times when waste generation was lower, and the disposal of refuse was not such an issue. On-site waste sorting and storage arrangements in such dwellings are often not well suited to the current systems of separation and collection. While we think Woollahra Council’s requirements for new dwellings are probably appropriate, at least for the present, problems experienced with waste storage in the older housing stock may well result in less than optimal capture of recyclables. Smaller standard bins and better-designed crates might be helpful.

For small site-area dwellings, like those typical of the older parts of Watsons Bay, the 120 litre bin is often too large to store away from the front verandah (if there is one) or garden. The 120 litre bin is also unwieldy for older people. Our requests to Woollahra Council for a twice-weekly collection to be provided in such areas using 55 litre bins, along the same lines as those provided in the Paddington area of the Municipality, were declined when the weekly service was inaugurated. We still think smaller bins would be helpful, although we recognise the added collection costs they would entail.

The standard weekly *garbage* collection service included in the current \$251 per year Domestic Waste Management Charge (which covers the garbage and recycling and *Clean-up* services) is limited to a bin with capacity of 120 litres for houses; additional capacity/service is available for a (current) fee of \$196 per year with the additional bin priced at \$55. It appears that few households actually arrange extra capacity for ordinary household waste on a formal, paid basis. Rather, in the event of occasional excess volumes arising, residents take advantage of unused capacity in neighbouring bins (and so some wasteful practices may be perpetuated by other people’s frugality), or they use bins in public places such as shopping centres and outdoors recreation areas. Those stratagems are probably efficient in that they minimise bin loadings for clearance, although they negate the incentive to reduce waste that is intended to be apparent in the charging system.

Presentation standards: The observed presentation standard for recyclables in crates is very variable. It is not clear how much departure from Council-stated *desiderata* is the result of litter dropped by passers-by, and how much from failure of householders to conform. Woollahra Council’s letter-boxed annual Waste and Recycling Service brochure is an eight-page fridge-magnet production of some size. During 2005, our Association requested a much more compact information package, with emphasis on the types of materials that are – and are not – collected for recycling, and on the desired methods of presentation. That request was declined, and the 2006 brochure continued the established format which we understand to be common to certain other council areas. While consistency of approach between councils is desirable, so that people

visiting as tourists (or moving home between jurisdictions) face a standard array of services and presentation rules, we still think the brochure is too large and fragmented for ready reference, and quite unsuited to year-long visibility in a kitchen or other heavily-used domestic space.

Domestic appliances: A kerbside *Clean-up* collection is available at approximately quarterly intervals for general household items not included in the weekly services. It does not purport to collect building refuse, motor vehicle parts and the like, but they are frequently observable among items put out for the collection – and collected. Perhaps reflecting the perceived relatively high socio-economic status of the area, scavenging activity about *Clean-up* collections is observable and probably financially rewarding for some. This suggests that at least some discarded materials and items have value for other people, and perhaps that wider knowledge of precinct collection dates – for example, by publication in the local press - might encourage more scavenging and more effective re-use of goods and materials. Whether more scavenging would be welcome to residents is a moot point: scavengers do tend to scatter rubbish as they inspect it.

For major items of household appliances, there is sometimes opportunity offered by retailers/retailers to remove old items when new replacement items are bought. We think this is a sound approach that might usefully be more widely adopted and publicised.

Electronic waste poses a major problem for householders who do not or cannot use private vehicles to transport equipment to designated recycle collection points. Observation indicates much of this waste is placed out for *Clean-up* collections. Better and more frequent information about appropriate reception agencies and depots might help.

Chemical/poisonous material wastes are collected occasionally in the locality under the aegis of Sydney Water. Getting such materials to the collection point is difficult unless people drive, and the frequency of such collections is low. Retention at home of used batteries and similar materials pending such a collection is not always practical for people in small houses or flats, nor is it necessarily safe. It appears that most battery wastes are disposed of in the ordinary garbage collection. To date we have taken no action on this matter.

Paying for waste removal: Our Association has no quarrel with the present level of the Domestic Waste Management Charge at \$251/year/household. given the nature and standard of the service presently provided to householders. Of course, that Charge does not fund the non-domestic waste management sphere of activity; as ratepayers, our Association is presently much concerned at the tendency of Woollahra Council to increase residential rate levels at above-average rates, to continue its expansion of people-related services at the expense of infrastructure maintenance and traditional core services, including waste management.

Public domain waste management: We have severe concerns about the inflexibility of waste management in the public domain. There appears to be an inability to position sufficient additional bins in advance of predictably heavy-demand periods - such as major harbour events – in parks and at the beaches on very hot days, even when unusual heat has been predicted by the Meteorological Bureau. Our efforts to encourage council waste management staff to assess and, when appropriate, react to weather forecasts have so far met no positive response.

In some instances, such as at Parsley Bay, bins are located where they are accessible to staff for servicing, but this is not always where they are most likely to be useful to the public. The issue of placement seems to result primarily from the large size (typically 120 and 240 litres) of bins and the understandable industrial health and safety implications of moving them about when they are full. Our suggestions over the Summer this year that the bin size might be reduced in popular places where the terrain is difficult, or that foreshore bins might be serviced from the Harbour, have not been accepted.

At Watsons Bay waterfront, the takeaway food outlets consistently generate waste packaging well in excess of the capacity of the waste receptacles in their vicinity at weekends, and often during the week. Loose waste is dispersed by wind, rats and birds about the public open space, the beach, and the Harbour waters. In response to our repeated and renewed complaints about this situation, we were advised in October 2005

that Woollahra Council was discussing the matter with the operators of the takeaway food outlets. No change is apparent at this date.

Refuse management at Watsons Bay wharf is presently the subject of complaint and discussion between the NSW Maritime Authority and our Association; we understand that the wharf lessee is being requested to remove its locked waste storage skip from the public areas of the wharf where the presence of the skip attracts loose refuse from ferry patrons, fishers, and sightseers. This should treat the present problem of litter accumulation and dispersal into the Harbour; however, it will not address the issue of providing a convenient litter disposal point at the wharf for the public.

Attitudes to waste disposal: Ever since North Sydney Council removed bins from its commercial area in the late 1980s, there has been a view evident that the provision of public litter bins simply encourages the disposition of litter, and that people should take their litter home with them. That view has extended in Woollahra Council to active discouragement of residents from using public bins for their household rubbish. With the introduction of a once-weekly garbage removal service, however, there is not much choice (other than imposition on neighbours) for residents leaving home for business trips or vacations who may well need to dispose of putrescible waste that would otherwise foul their storage area pending their return. Even for stay-at-home residents, the low frequency of the weekly garbage service is not helpful to householders or their (necessarily near) neighbours when highly putrescible wastes are concerned, especially in small lot areas like those of the old parts of Watsons Bay.

A grudging Council administrative attitude to the provision of public litter bins in parks has not observably reduced park litter anyway. In one instance in 2005 bins were removed from a park in our area in response to complaints about occasional resident use of them for household waste. There followed complaint from residents who had been using the bin to dispose of park and street litter from nearby, and littering of the park itself with beverage containers from visitors, various types of rubbish, and uncollected dog faeces – presumably from residents' dogs. Our Association's sustained protests led to reinstatement of a new bin in that case, and the relevant park is generally tidy enough now. In contrast, the highly popular Cliffside walk along the parklands at the eastern ocean side of Vaucluse and Watsons Bay has very few litter bins available; whether because of the scarcity of bins or because of wind-borne dispersal from elsewhere, litter at the outer edges is always obvious but not readily accessible for removal beyond the safety fencing.

With few exceptions, litter bins in public places in our area are all-purpose, so there is no separation of recyclable materials at that stage. We do not know whether separation occurs at a later stage. Observation of public area waste collection/separation stations in neighbouring council areas indicates a fairly large land take required for a full array of containers for paper, glass, metal, and garbage wastes; such a scale of installation would probably not be welcome at many of the likely sites in our area, nor is it likely that it could be replicated to provide as many waste disposal points as are currently in use. We have not sought a wider provision of separate bins at this stage.

Location-specific issues: Being a waterside location, much of the public open space of our district includes Harbour foreshores and beaches, which are highly popular with residents and visitors alike. At our Association's request many years ago, Woollahra Council required the lessee of its kiosk at Camp Cove beach to refrain from stocking and selling glass-packaged items, and that requirement has been well and consistently observed. However, much glass packaging still finds its way to Camp Cove beach and the Watsons Bay waterfront beaches and parklands. Bottled beverages are sourced from the local hotel and shops, and perhaps from further afield. Broken glass is obviously incompatible with safe beaches. We have seen *No Glass* signage used in similar locations elsewhere, but to date Woollahra Council has taken no such action. We think it should.

For many years, we have sought to have Woollahra Council provide lidded bins in public areas near the waterfront, so as to minimise incursions by birds and vermin and dispersal of the contents by wind. Despite that, many unlidded bins remain in public places near the waterfront and windborne debris from them easily finds its way into the streets, Harbour waters, and parks. Woollahra Council's recently adopted standard street furniture design (used in parks, streets, and public areas generally) incorporates a bin with only partial enclosure by way of an inward-sloping metal lid with a large central hole for insertion. While


this may well trap some vermin that get into the bin but cannot get out, it does not exclude all birds, or prevent wind dispersion of litter at the upper level of the bin. As noted above, in our area such bins are frequently over-filled each weekend. We still think lidded bins are necessary.

Building waste generation has enlarged in recent years with a wave of renovation, demolition and reconstruction, and alteration and addition in the area, especially for older dwellings. Observation suggests that rigorous recycling of materials on-site is not common; what happens when waste is removed is not clear to us, but it is certainly not uncommon to see mixed timber/masonry waste in roadside skips at construction sites. A former Woollahra Council ban on use of used building materials has disappeared, and so the opportunity to re-use such materials is available for those who wish to do so. However, on small sites, there may well not be space to store such materials on-site pending re-use. The issue is not only a local one, and seems to warrant attention on an industry-wide basis.

Towards waste minimisation: Apart from exhortation, we are unaware of any discernibly effective incentive for people in our area to minimise their use of resources and re-use them, and so generate less actual and potential waste. As noted above, volume limitations on standard-fee garbage removal are typically by-passed by use of surplus capacity in neighbouring bins, and the price mechanism is thereby rendered ineffectual.

It seems that for as long as they can dispose of unwanted, worn-out, superseded, broken, useless or unused materials conveniently, and at an acceptable cost, people will continue to use resources as lavishly – or as frugally - as they wish. The importance of community education about waste minimisation on a continuing basis is obvious, but it is difficult to see how the credibility of the minimisation message can impact much when waste removal is undertaken with so little apparent difficulty or cost.

Should Woollahra Council become unable to cope with the task of removal, some impetus for re-focussing of the waste service would be generated. We think domestic waste management is universally seen by residents as a local council matter, and the service responsibility is strongly identified with the individual council for the area even when contractors perform specific services. Coalitions and regional groupings of councils may be helpful for co-ordination of waste management strategies, and appear to have been helpful in the past. Inter-Council variations in the level of the Domestic Waste Management Charge mechanism may serve to differentiate councils in terms of apparent economy and efficiency in conducting their domestic waste services, assuming the menu of services to be fairly similar and the cost dissections to be comparably reliable. The flat rate application of the Charge to households of varying sizes and conservation dispositions may act to dilute the minimisation message somewhat, but it has equity attributes that commend it to us anyway.



Michael Rolfe, President

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