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From Food Waste to Pig Farmers

A History of Trash Services in San Diego

The People's Ordinance, an initiative that governed San Diego's waste management, was adopted in 1919. Life was very different in San Diego – there were about 74,000 people living in the city. Many residents worked in canneries and commercial fishing. These industries, along with hotels, restaurants, and people's homes, created a lot of food waste. Food waste was called "garbage" to distinguish it from other trash, which was called rubbish. It was harder and more expensive to manage this food waste than other trash, until the City of San Diego's trash contractors realized they could make a profit selling it as food to pig farmers.

In 1917 The local Federation of Women's Clubs unsuccessfully petitioned the City to manage its own trash and hire a sanitary engineer. The women suggested the City sell some of its food waste to hog farmers and burn the rest at City incinerators. They proposed that the City could pay for the program with the profits of selling barrels of pig food to farmers.

In 1918 A group called the Hotel and Restaurant Men was forced by a City ordinance to stop selling their food garbage directly to hog farmers. They had been using this approach to collect income instead of paying fees to the City's contractor.

In 1919 The Hotel and Restaurant Men backed a ballot initiative they called the People's Ordinance "for free refuse collection." The ballot did not propose a free service but instead assured residents and business owners a reasonable price for collection services. At the time, the City's trash contractors were charging exorbitant fees and providing a terrible level of service. Instead of paying contractors ever-increasing fees for a terrible level of service, the Ordinance promised voters better service with no extra cost to their pocketbooks. The approved Ordinance required the City to manage trash collection and disposal, and to create a new tax to pay for the new services. It directed the City to fund its operations by collecting the difference between the cost of trash collection and new income the City could earn by converting food waste to hog food.

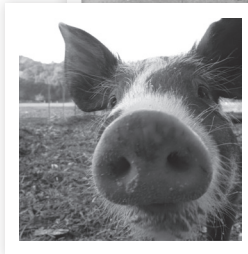
Unfortunately, when the People's Ordinance was adopted, the Council failed to adopt the new tax. The City also lost the income it had been earning from its contracts with private trash haulers. In effect, the City exchanged a \$4,800 annual income for a \$76,000 annual liability.

The City's Sales of Food Waste to Pig Farmers

- **From 1919 – 1928**, steady sales covered many of the City's trash collection costs.
- **From 1929 – 1939**, the Great Depression caused a drop in demand and fewer sales to farmers.
- **From 1940 – 1959**, nearby farmlands became urban communities. Farmers moved further away and hauling costs increased.
- **In 1962**, the City outlawed farms within City limits. This meant even fewer customers for the pig food and even longer hauling routes.
- **Between 1962 and 1970**, the City stopped selling food waste to farmers.



Credit: San Diego Historical Society



Since 1970 The City has operated its trash services without an income from selling pig food. To pay for the service, it has relied on the City's General Fund, which covers most of the cost of collecting residential waste, in addition to paying for most of the City's core services, including police and fire services, parks and recreation, and libraries.

In the past five decades City leaders have recognized the financial impact its trash collection services have had on the General Fund. However, in 1986, voters amended the People's Ordinance to keep the City from charging fees for City trash collection. The 2022 vote for Measure B changed that. Measure B made it possible for the City to charge its customers for a range of solid waste collection services, including trash, recycling and green waste. At this time, the City of San Diego is the only city in the county and one of the few cities in the nation that does not charge for trash collection services. This could change under Measure B.

Want to know more?

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