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What do San Diegans want in trash pickup, and at what cost? City launches massive outreach effort to find out

The forums kick off a year-long effort expected to end next July with San Diego starting to charge single-family homes for trash pickup for the first time.



San Diego is beginning outreach to determine what residents of single-family want from their trash pickup. (Nelvin C. Cepeda / The San Diego Union-Tribune)



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San Diego is launching one of the most robust community outreach efforts in city history to help determine how much residents of single-family homes should pay for trash pickup and which new services they want most.

City officials will host nine neighborhood forums in August and September to determine how often people want recycling picked up, how bulky items should be handled and whether a “pay as you throw” program could work.

The forums will kick off a year-long effort that’s expected to end next July with San Diego beginning to charge single-family homes a monthly fee for trash pickup for the first time.

The city had been prohibited from charging for trash pickup at single-family homes under the 1919 People’s Ordinance, but city voters amended that law in 2022 to allow the city to begin charging.

City officials say they’ve chosen an unusually aggressive \$1.7 million outreach process, which some have criticized as too costly, because they are starting from scratch with essentially no knowledge of what people want.

“This is an historic opportunity for the department – we’ve never done something like this,” Jeremy Bauer, assistant director of the city’s Environmental Services Department, said this week.

Officials also say a thorough process is necessary to avoid lawsuits accusing the city of violating Proposition 218, which prohibits government agencies from charging more for a service than it costs.

That’s partly why the city will host forums in each of San Diego’s nine council districts and host an additional online forum Aug. 24 for people who can’t make the others.

City officials are also seeking to boost attendance and participation at the forums by getting help from community-based organizations like Little Saigon San Diego, the Chicano Federation and the San Diego API Coalition.

“It’s giving us a chance to make sure they know about this effort, and we’re inviting them to be a part of it,” Bauer said. “It’s a way for us to build a bridge to those communities and their networks. It will also help to build trust in our overall effort.”

An online survey will also be available on the city’s website.

The \$1.7 million for outreach is part of a broader \$3.5 million contract with a consultant that also covers analyzing how large monthly trash bills should be and whether the city should upgrade its trash and recycling operations.

Bauer said the consultant, HDR Engineering, is studying whether the city is efficiently collecting trash and recycling now — and how it could improve.

The goal of that effort is upgrading service, reducing how often trash trucks miss certain houses and making sure the city is a good steward of every dollar collected under the new fee.

The consultant has also been working with other cities that provide municipal trash service to get information on best practices, potential struggles and innovations they've made or considered.

A key issue is whether San Diego should use a “pay as you throw” program that would reward households for producing less trash and for recycling a greater percentage of the waste they produce.

A key argument in favor of the 2022 ballot measure was that San Diego couldn't adopt such a program as long as trash service was free, because the city had no ability to vary rates. Bauer said such programs can be complicated.

“We wouldn't want someone to choose a much smaller container to save money,” he said. “We want people to choose the right number of containers for the amount of trash, recycling and organics they produce.”

Another issue to consider is how to handle bulky trash pickup. Some cities have designated bulky trash days, while others give customers vouchers they can use to schedule a bulky pickup just for themselves.

Bauer said the consultant is also exploring whether fees would be phased in and how low-income households might get subsidized by the city.

The consultant is developing a model that includes a base rate and then allows add-ons for additional services or containers.

An initial recommended rate structure and set of services will likely be presented to the City Council next winter, with the council expected to finalize those in the late spring so billing can begin in July, Bauer said.

The city's independent budget analyst said in fall 2022 that a rough estimate of monthly bills for single-family homes would fall between \$23 and \$29 if all the 285,000 households that had been getting no-fee service were charged equally.

But bills will almost certainly be higher because of inflation since then, and because the IBA's analysis didn't account for increased service levels and the need to create a new city billing bureaucracy.

City officials have said they expect fees for trash service to raise roughly \$80 million a year in new revenue.

The nine neighborhood forums will be organized like open houses. They will feature various stations where people can learn about existing trash and recycling services, what their taxes pay for and other details.

The forums, all scheduled for 5:30 to 7 p.m., will be held at the following locations on the following dates:

Aug. 5, Logan Heights Library, 567 S. 28th St.; Aug. 6, Valencia Park/Malcolm X Library, 5148 Market St.; Aug. 12, Mira Mesa Library, 8405 New Salem St.; Aug. 13, Mission Valley Library, 2123 Fenton Parkway; Aug. 19, Mission Hills Library, 215 W. Washington St.;

Aug. 26, Point Loma Library, 3701 Voltaire St.; Aug. 27, Serra Mesa-Kearny Mesa Library, 9005 Aero Drive; Sept. 3, Scripps Miramar Ranch Library, 10301 Scripps Lake Drive; Sept. 9, La Jolla/Riford Library, 7555 Draper Ave.

A virtual workshop will be held from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on Aug. 24.

For details, visit cleangreensd.org.