

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: APRIL 11, 2006

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO #103: PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS TO THE LEAF COLLECTION PROGRAM

There has been increased focus on the City's leaf collection program in recent years due to resident complaints that the level of service has not met resident expectations. There are several factors that affect the quality of this program (besides weather conditions, that determine when the leaves fall), including current processes that are not as efficient as they could be, inadequate staffing levels, and undependable vehicles. Indeed, for the FY 2006 leaf season, staff from not only the Solid Waste Division, but also from the Maintenance Division were called into weekend service in January to clean up piles of leaves that remained on City streets, well after the program should have concluded.

As a consequence, I am proposing (for Council consideration in the add/delete process either out of General Fund tax revenues or from a \$10 increase in the City's solid waste fee charged for residents on their tax bills) a number of improvements to the current level of leaf collection services, as well as improvements to litter collection efforts in certain areas of the City that currently lose that service during the leaf collection season. The total cost of all these improvements is \$176,250. Any or all of these proposals described in this memorandum could be selected by Council.

A. Bagged Leaf Collection (+\$40,700)

First, if Council wishes to fund it, a new bagged leaf collection program has been developed. Resident participation would be voluntary. (This program idea was originally raised by Councilman Krupicka in response to a Beverley Hills resident who saw the program in Arlington.) Under this proposal, the City would provide biodegradable paper leaf bags to citizens at several distribution sites, to be determined. If they choose, residents can rake and bag leaves, and put them at the curb for collection. On the day following their regular refuse collection day, the City would pick up these biodegradable paper bags and then take them to be mulched and recycled. The City will continue to vacuum leaves, but if a resident misses the vacuum service in their neighborhood, it will be possible for that person to dispose of their leaves without calling

for a return trip by a leaf vacuuming truck. A resident could also choose to bag some leaves and continue to rake others to the curb. Bagged leaf pickup also creates certainty for residents that if they bag their leaves using the biodegradable bags, their leaves will be picked up on a designated day.

The program also allows residents who now use plastic bags to collect their leaves to switch to the biodegradable paper bags. Since plastic bagged leaves end up at the waste-to-energy plant, switching to paper bagged leaves which are recycled will save the City some waste-to-energy tip fees, as well as help increase the City's recycling rate.

Another advantage of this program is that it allows for a scheduled cutoff date to vacuuming service at the end of the leaf collection season. There remains an option for disposing of leaves for several more weeks without crews and leaf-vacuuming vehicles continuing to make passes through the City. For instance, the bag collection program could end three weeks after the vacuuming program to assure adequate time for citizens to dispose of their leaves.

The resources required for this proposed program include an existing backup refuse collection truck, and the temporary assignment of an employee from the Maintenance Division. Two additional seasonal employees will be needed to collect the bagged leaves and to assist in unloading them at the leaf mulch site on Eisenhower Avenue. New costs for implementing this program would be \$30,000 for the purchase of biodegradable leaf bags (which cost \$0.25 apiece), and approximately \$10,700 for salaries for temporary employees. (Overtime is not expected to be associated with this program.) This makes the total program cost \$40,700.

B. Compacting Leaf Trucks (+\$39,250)

Another improvement that is already being implemented is the replacement of three leaf vacuuming trucks with compacting leaf trucks. The old vehicles are already on the equipment replacement schedule for FY 2007. By replacing the existing vehicles with compacting vehicles, the number of trips to the leaf mulch site should be cut from five or six per day to approximately three trips per day. The interruption to the collection process caused by trips from neighborhoods to the leaf mulch site on Eisenhower Avenue is one of the largest inefficiencies in the program in terms of employee downtime.

The resources required for this program to work at its best include three additional seasonal employees in order to increase the current staffing level from two- to three-person crews. This is due to the size of the vehicles, as well as the increased time that employees will be actually vacuuming leaves. Currently a two-person crew (one driver, and one vacuumer) uses the built-in "breaks" that employees receive to rest while riding to the mulch site. The cost of the three seasonal employees (one driver, one vacuumer, and one raker) is estimated to be approximately \$28,000, including overtime. The added cost of depreciation for three compacting vehicles will be \$11,250.

C. Converting a Vehicle to a Leaf Compactor (+\$75,100)

T&ES proposes to convert an existing vehicle in its fleet to a fourth compacting leaf truck to increase the efficiency of the collection operation. Many years ago, the Department purchased a line-painting vehicle for its traffic operation that proved to be too cumbersome to use from both a process and staffing perspective. The chassis on this vehicle is in excellent condition, and it has been determined that it could be retrofitted with compacting leaf collection equipment for a cost of approximately \$50,000. An additional driver would be temporarily reassigned from Street Cleaning during leaf collection and two seasonal employees would be added to collect leaves at a cost of approximately \$18,800, including overtime, and the cost of depreciation would need to be budgeted at \$6,300. The driver for this vehicle will be an existing employee in the Street Cleaning Section.

D. Litter Collection Improvements (+\$10,700)

Two additional seasonal employees are proposed for litter collection activities. The City receives complaints from areas that do not have a large inventory of mature trees, as street cleaning resources in their neighborhoods are redeployed to collecting leaves for several months. The addition of two more seasonal positions will allow litter collection to continue by City street cleaning personnel in these neighborhoods rather than focusing their efforts on leaf collection activities. These seasonal employees will cost \$10,700, with no overtime anticipated.

E. Communications Improvements (No Added Cost)

T&ES is committed to improving its communication with neighborhoods throughout the City. This would include continually updating the City's website to inform citizens of dates that the leaf vacuuming will occur in their neighborhoods and informing civic associations of the status of the program throughout the season. The communication plan also includes creating a leaf collection hotline, which will better facilitate notification of any possible changes in the leaf collection schedule, and which will convey information regarding the overall leaf collection program. No additional resources are needed for this activity.

F. Other Associated Costs (+\$10,500)

This proposal also includes \$6,600 to bring the mulch grinder rental budget up to the level of actual costs and \$3,900 for other non-personnel operating costs such as tools, equipment and uniforms.

Fiscal Impact

In total, the FY 2007 cost of these proposed leaf collection program enhancements would be approximately \$198,350. Because approximately \$22,100 would be funded by the reallocation of resources within T&ES, the net General Fund cost increase in the FY 2007 budget would be \$176,250. An “add” would have to be made to the proposed budget in this amount for these improvements to be funded. (Please refer to Attachment 1.)

In preparing this budget memo, City staff met with representatives of Arlington County’s Solid Waste Division (which has had a biodegradable leaf bag program for more than a decade) to discuss their leaf collection program. It was learned that Arlington County includes \$9 per year in its residential refuse collection fee to partially cover the cost of leaf collection and mulching. One option to fund this \$176,250 in added leaf collection program costs would be to increase the City’s solid waste fee by \$10 per year.

Attachment 1

Leaf Collection Expenditures	FY 2007 Proposed	FY 2007 Revised	Difference
Personnel	\$260,835	329,035	68,200
Leaf Bags	0	30,000	30,000
Vehicle Depreciation	71,979	88,779	16,800
Vehicle Retrofit	0	50,000	50,000
Mulch Grinder Rental	28,400	35,000	6,600
Other Operating Costs	1,500	5,400	3,900
Total	362,714	538,214	175,500