



sanitation

Edward Grayson Commissioner

Testimony of Edward Grayson, Commissioner New York City Department of Sanitation

Oversight Hearing on Clean Streets and Expanding Vital Sanitation Service

New York City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management

Friday, March 4, 2022
10:30 A.M.

Good morning Chair Nurse and members of the City Council Committee on Sanitation and Solid Waste Management. I am Edward Grayson, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY), and I am joined by Bridget Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Recycling and Sustainability, and Gregory Anderson, Deputy Commissioner for Policy and External Affairs, and Stephen Harbin, Chief of Cleaning Operations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

I want to welcome you all to this committee, including both new and returning members. The Department and this Committee, as well as the entire Council, have a longstanding tradition of collaboration, dialogue and advancement, and I look forward to continuing that tradition with each of you. We share the same commitment to our City, to improving the quality of life and supporting thriving neighborhoods across the five boroughs, and to building a sustainable waste management system. I look forward to working with you to advance these goals.

Our Department's mission is to keep New York City healthy, safe and clean. I have been a member of this Department for 23 years now, and my parents were as well for decades before me. I am proud to continue our Department's more than 140-year legacy of service to New Yorkers. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has created substantial challenges for us. Budget cuts and restorations, behavior change, and operational challenges have all reinforced the importance not only in investing in Sanitation services but also in working with individuals, community leaders, elected officials, and others to keep our City clean.

The topic of this hearing is a broad one, and my testimony today will highlight a few areas where we face both the greatest challenges and opportunities in our efforts to deliver on this critical mission. Afterwards, my team and I will be happy to answer your questions.

Opportunities for New Funding Sources

Over this Department's history, our services have been funded, nearly entirely, by City tax levy funds. This means that our budget is often closely tied to the cyclical periods of expansion and contraction in the overall City budget. However, we sit at the tail end of a

decisions made by manufacturers, corporate executives, retailers, marketers and individual consumers who determine how much and what kind of waste we must manage.

The Governor's proposal for Extended Producer Responsibility for Packaging and Paper Products would create transformational change in this relationship, requiring upstream manufacturers and retailers to take some financial responsibility for the end-of-life of these products. This policy would require these manufacturers to pay for the operation of curbside recycling programs statewide, including here in New York City. In short, this program could bring as much as \$100 million or more to New York City each year, which could free up funds for investment in recycling outreach and education, new waste diversion programs and other vital sanitation services. DSNY strongly supports the resolution sponsored by Speaker Adams being considered today, and I encourage you to work with your colleagues in the State legislature to advance this important proposal.

Street Cleaning Programs

All 8.8 million New Yorkers, as well as the millions of visitors and commuters, have a role to play in keeping our City clean. Litter and trash do not just magically appear on City streets — each piece, bag or pile has a person associated with it—someone who tossed it on the ground, dumped it on the corner, or threw it out a car window. I ask all New Yorkers to do the right thing: Don't litter. Use our corner litter baskets properly. Clean up after your pet. Move your car for alternate side parking. Sweep the sidewalk in front of your home or business. And if you see a litter condition that needs DSNY's attention, please let us know by calling 311.

Our core street cleaning services include mechanical street sweeping and litter basket collection. DSNY has more than 23,000 litter baskets citywide, which are intended for use by pedestrians, including residents, commuters and tourists, to dispose of items as they make their way around the city. Litter baskets are primarily placed in commercial districts and near transit hubs, areas with higher concentrations of pedestrian traffic. Prior to the pandemic, DSNY was funded to run 736 litter basket trucks each week. In July 2020, that number was reduced to 272 trucks per week. Today, DSNY is funded to run 588 litter basket trucks each week, a 116 percent increase from service levels at the depths of the pandemic.

A portion of this funding, comprising \$8.6 million and 136 weekly litter basket trucks total, was funded as a one-time initiative in the FY2022 adopted budget. We will continue to work with the Mayor's Office and City Council to advocate for the renewal of these supplemental basket trucks, and we will continue to have discussions with the Administration and OMB regarding baseline funding levels for critical litter basket collection service.

The second core component of our cleaning programs is mechanical sweeping. For nearly 70 years, the City has used mechanical brooms operated by Sanitation Workers to clean our streets, including along the curb line. Alternate Side Parking (ASP) is a crucial tool to ensuring these brooms are effective — allowing access to the curb during scheduled sweeping windows in residential and commercial areas alike. Mechanical brooms sweep up litter, leaves and other small debris in along the curb, but they only work if drivers move their cars for posted street cleaning and other parking regulations.

Since 2020, ASP frequency has been reduced to just once time per week in residential areas that previously had more frequent sweeping. While initially implemented as part of the City's social distancing programs, this change was extended through budget cuts last year. The reduction in sweeping frequency has not only reduced the number of opportunities to clean

along the curb line, but it has also reduced the rate of compliance on the days when sweeping regulations remain in effect. For some drivers, the risk of a \$65 ticket once a week is simply the cost of free parking on the City's streets. We are working with the Administration to evaluate the frequency of ASP regulations and determine the future of this program going forward. In the meantime, we urge you to talk to your constituents and help them understand the importance of moving their vehicles on ASP days.

The Department has also created the Precision Cleaning Initiative (PCI), with teams to conduct targeted cleanings of litter conditions, illegal dumping, and overflowing litter baskets. These conditions are eyesores that affect New Yorkers' quality of life and threaten NYC's recovery. Teams are dispatched based on DSNY field observations, 311 complaints and referrals from other City agencies and community groups. This initiative celebrates its one-year anniversary next week. To date, PCI crews have collected nearly 17,000 eyesore conditions and emptied 46,500 additional litter baskets citywide.

In the past year, the Department has greatly expanded our Community Clean Up program, working with volunteers and community partners across the five boroughs. Department lends tools, trash bags, brooms and dustpans to volunteers and can now deliver these tools directly to the volunteers with our community clean-up van. The Department partnered with an estimated 7,200 New Yorkers on 278 volunteer cleanups during Fiscal Year 2021, nearly triple the number before the COVID crisis in FY2019. In the first eight months of FY 2022, we have partnered on 146 cleanups, with many more to come as we head into spring. This is another area where we would love to partner with each one of you to help us keep all communities across NYC clean.

Zero Waste Programs

In 2015, the City established a goal of sending Zero Waste to Landfills, building off the Department's robust curbside recycling program and several other diversion programs. In the last eight years, DSNY has built a foundation of programs, policies, and critical technical support and community engagement approaches to move toward that goal. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had disrupted our steady progress, and we are working to restore and expand programs to get back on track toward this goal.

Organic waste, including food scraps and yard waste, is the most significant contributor of waste-related greenhouse gas emissions — and is also the largest fraction of New York City's waste stream, one third in total. Over the last decade, DSNY has grown to be a national leader in providing drop-off opportunities to compost food scraps. We have expanded the program to 210 sites citywide — the largest in the program's history — including at least one in every community board. In FY2022, DSNY's budget includes an additional \$3.5 million in funds to support the expansion of community composting and food scrap drop-off sites to our current levels, and we look forward to further discussions with OMB and the Mayor's Office regarding this program going forward.

Last October, DSNY restarted Curbside Composting, which had been suspended in 2020 due to the fiscal crisis. This iteration of the program allows buildings and residents to sign up and express interest in receiving weekly curbside composting service. Enrollment opened in August, and we have received more than 61,000 unique signups to date, representing more than 43,000 addresses. We currently offer service to residents in seven community districts. We are working with OMB and the Mayor's Office to evaluate this program with a goal of increasing both equity and efficiency, and we are not planning to expand to additional districts at this time.

The Department has also expanded non-curbside services to promote the reuse and recycling of other products, including the DonateNYC, RefashionNYC, and E-cycleNYC programs. Since 2014, these programs have diverted more than 400,000 tons of waste for reuse or recycling. Today, free on-call apartment building pickups are provided to more than 922,000 households for electronics recycling, and more than 200,000 households and hundreds of commercial and institutional facilities for textiles reuse. And these programs continue to grow.

DSNY also works to reduce the improper and dangerous disposal of hazardous products, including electronics, household chemicals, and rechargeable batteries. In 2015, New York State law banned the disposal of unwanted electronics in the landfill, instead requiring electronics manufacturers and retailers to establish programs to collect these products for proper recycling. While this law has its flaws, it has been successful at diverting thousands of tons of electronics from landfills. DSNY operates the free E-cycleNYC program for electronics recycling in apartment buildings with 10+ units and accepts electronics for recycling at our SAFE Disposal events and Special Waste Sites in each borough. We currently offer curbside electronics collection in Staten Island, but this program is not funded in future fiscal years.

State law also requires certain retailers take back rechargeable batteries for recycling. Unlike more common alkaline batteries, rechargeable batteries, including lithium-ion batteries, are dangerous products that can cause fires and pose a threat to employees of both DSNY and our recycling vendors. Last year, an improperly-disposed rechargeable battery started a large fire in a paper recycling barge at our 59th Street MTS. Thanks to the quick action by DSNY and FDNY employees, the facility suffered no major damage, and thankfully there were only minor injuries. These events are increasingly common at facilities in New York City and around the country, and it is imperative that residents properly recycle these products.

The State law, which overrode a previous City law, does not allow for local enforcement by DSNY. It also excludes the growing number of rechargeable batteries in e-mobility devices — including electric bikes, mopeds and scooters. DSNY is working with the Fire Department and our counterparts across the State to raise awareness about the potential dangers of these products, and we are hopeful that the State legislation will amend the current law to cover these products.

Changing Streetscapes

The Department is exploring new models for waste setout and collection, including approaches that will move waste setout from the sidewalk and into the roadway. This program, called “Clean Curbs” seeks to test this new approach, which can contain waste, reduce rodents, improve quality of life and increase mobility, in a variety of contexts across the city. We are currently in the solicitation process to select an MWBE vendor to test the Clean Curbs model for residential waste on a small scale, potentially the first in a series of pilots that will inform our future planning.

In December, we unveiled a pilot network of “Smart Bins,” unstaffed and automated food scrap drop-off bins controlled with a smart phone or RFID card. These hold the promise of an expanded network of drop-off sites available to residents and visitors 24/7. We are also working to implement new rules, effective next month, that require new large residential buildings to submit “Waste Management Plans” at the beginning of the planning process, so that they account for the impacts of waste management in building design and operation.

DSNY is also a close partner with the Department of Transportation and other agencies seeking to transform our streetscapes to make them safer, healthier and more vibrant public spaces. This winter, we are testing an expanded fleet of 30 mini plows to clear snow from bike lanes and other public space infrastructure. We are working to procure these units for ongoing use and are in discussions with OMB and the Mayor's Office regarding staffing needs to provide cleaning and snow clearing services longer term. As the City continues to change the streetscapes, we will work with our partners to adapt our services to maintain these new spaces.

Conclusion

Our work on these important topics is far from done. We continue to expand and hone our programs, invest in new technologies and infrastructure, and work to improve the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of our operations.

The Department is currently planning for an updated waste characterization study, required by City law to be released in early 2024. This study will tell us what is in our waste stream, what we're currently capturing in our recycling and diversion programs, and how the COVID pandemic has fundamentally changed our waste. This study will inform the planning for our updated comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan, required by State law to be completed in 2026. This study and plan will lay the groundwork for the future of our services, policy and programs, and we look forward to working with the City Council to plan for this future.

I want to again welcome the new members of this Council and this Committee and congratulate you on your role in this vital work. On behalf of our 9,700 employees, I want to thank the City Council for your support in our effort to clean our streets, sidewalks and public spaces. Our frontline workers are the true heroes of this effort, working day after day in all manner of conditions, doing the tireless work of picking up litter, emptying corner baskets, and collecting our trash, recycling and organics. For 140 years, our employees have worked to make New York City neighborhoods cleaner and to improve quality of life for our residents and visitors.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and we are now happy to answer your questions.