

It's garbage -- and it's on the St. Paul council's agenda

Some council members want to wade into the controversial subject of municipal garbage collection to see if there's a better option for St. Paul.

By CHRIS HAVENS

Star Tribune

August 5, 2009

St. Paul might start talking trash. City Council member Dave Thune submitted a resolution Wednesday for next week's agenda that requests a study of options for garbage collection in the city. Currently, residents can pick whom they want to take their trash. But Thune said it's time to reexamine that system to see whether there's a more efficient and eco-friendly alternative.

One option might be so-called organized collection, where the city would take over or contract out garbage pick up. There's a process laid out in state law on how the city would need to go about putting together an organized collection plan, should that option be chosen. A 2002 study by Ramsey and Washington counties showed public collection has benefits, such as lowering costs and improving efficiency, but it would require a major change in the current system. Also, many people have opposed the idea, both residents and industry representatives. "It can be very controversial," Thune said. "People tend to really like their service."

Some metro cities contract with one company to haul trash, others maintain competition but designate zones or specific pickup days when trucks can be on the streets. In St. Paul, some residents complain about noise and wear on streets and alleys caused by garbage trucks, Thune said. "Common sense would say not having five trucks down the same alley would save some wear and tear," he said. Given the economy and the city's financial situation, it's worth exploring options, he said. The city spends "significant" resources enforcing clean-property laws on people who don't get rid of their rubbish properly, according to the resolution.

Residents -- from the Battle Creek to Mac-Groveland neighborhoods -- have been bringing their neighbors together to select one hauler to reduce truck traffic and emissions on their blocks. Currently there are about 50 licensed trash haulers in St. Paul, although about half provide residential service. They range from small local firms to large multinational companies.

Thune has the support of colleagues Lee Helgen and Russ Stark. "It's always good to study options," Helgen said. Other council members hadn't decided Wednesday whether they would support Thune's resolution as is. If the council decides to move forward with the study, a report is expected to be completed by council research staff within four months.

Chris Havens • 612-673-4148