

Los Angeles Times

CALIFORNIA

L.A. trash haulers will drop some of their fees — and the city will help pay the tab



The Los Angeles City Council voted this week to rework its much criticized commercial trash pickup program, known as RecycLA. An employee with Athens Services, one of the program's contractors, moves a trash bin in West Los Angeles in 2017. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)

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FEB. 14, 2019 5:30 PM PT

The Los Angeles City Council has struck a deal with commercial trash haulers to eliminate some of the costly fees charged as part of RecycLA, Mayor Eric Garcetti's recycling program for businesses, condominium complexes and larger apartment buildings.

Under a settlement backed by Garcetti and the council, seven refuse companies would be barred from charging customers an extra \$10.67 every time a trash truck driver uses a key or remote control to open a locked garage door before emptying a blue recycling bin.

The haulers also would no longer be allowed to impose an extra \$26.68 “distance” charge each time a driver pulls a blue recycling bin more than 100 feet to the curb. A distance fee of \$37.36, charged when a blue bin is moved more than 200 feet, also would be prohibited under the deal.

The agreement only goes so far, however. Trash haulers will still be allowed to charge their extra fees — including the one for unlocking a locked gate — when emptying other types of garbage containers, such as the black bin that holds regular refuse.

The settlement ends a 15-month dispute between the Bureau of Sanitation and six trash haulers over the extra RecycLA fees, which, in many cases, added hundreds of additional dollars to the [commercial garbage bills](#) of [infuriated customers](#).

To secure those concessions, city officials agreed to pay the haulers half the revenue they will lose by giving up those extra fees. During the first year of the agreement, the city’s bill is expected to reach \$9.1 million, according to the proposal.

Sanitation officials said they will continue making payments to the haulers for the remaining years of the contract, with the total expected to reach no more than \$94.2 million through 2027. And they described the agreement as a good deal for the program’s estimated 66,000 customers.

Under the settlement, customers will receive a financial credit for any extra service charge imposed on a blue recycling bin since February 2018, said Daniel Meyers, commercial franchise division manager for the city’s Bureau of Sanitation.

“Not only will they see reductions in their bills due to the removal of the extra service charges on blue bins, but it provides an extra incentive to move things out of the black bin and into the blue bins,” he said.

Labor leaders and environmental groups spent nearly a decade pushing for RecycLA, which gave seven companies exclusive responsibility for specific sections of the city. Backers said the program would divert more trash from landfills, provide new protections for refuse workers and reduce the number of heavily polluting trash trucks on city streets.

Some business leaders panned this week’s agreement, calling it a backroom deal that does too little to address the program’s flaws.

Beverly Kenworthy, vice president of the Los Angeles office of the California Apartment Assn., said city leaders should have done much more to reduce the financial burden for RecycLA customers, many of whom saw their rates climb dramatically when the program was launched.

“Eliminating the additional fees provides little relief when costs have gone up more than 400% for some customers,” she added.

The changes to the RecycLA program should receive additional discussion on Tuesday, when two council committees are slated to go over the amendments to the trash haulers’ contracts.

The settlement will postpone by one year a pair of increases that had been scheduled to defray the cost of RecycLA’s food waste recycling program, according to the board report.

Those increases were to be 3% this year and next. Instead, they will be 3.5% next year and in 2021, Meyers said.

RecycLA formally began in July 2017, and within weeks customers began bombarding the city with complaints about their bills. The increases were driven in part by the extra fees in the haulers' contracts, which were approved by the mayor and the council.

By December 2017, the city and its trash haulers were [seriously at odds](#) over the fees being charged. Sanitation officials claimed that the trash company's extra service fees should not apply to recycling bins. Most refuse companies disagreed, describing such a prohibition as a breach of their contracts.

Doug Corcoran, an executive with the trash hauling company Waste Management, said he views this week's settlement as a good compromise. By stripping away the extra fees charged for emptying recycling bins, customers will have an additional incentive to recycle more, helping to meet the city's goal of diverting waste from landfills, he said.

"People want to recycle more. They just don't want to go broke doing it," said Corcoran, director of public sector services for Waste Management's Southern California office. "So this is a good way to address that."

