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## Fines could be on the horizon for Portland's curbside food composting

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Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian

Elaine Friedman of the Hillsdale neighborhood was surprised to find an extra charge on garbage bill. Her hauler told her it was because her composting cart -- filled mostly with yard debris -- was too heavy. "It's never overflowing," she said. Portland has allowed such charges for a long time, but new fines could be on the way.

Seven months **after Portland launched curbside food composting**, complaints remain common.

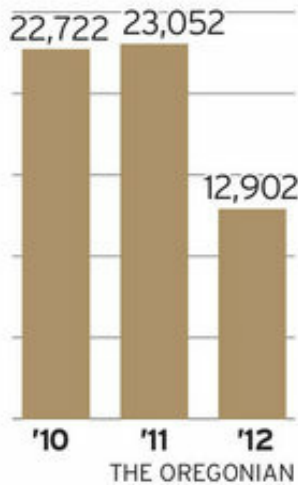
But city officials say all is going according to plan: Portland is sending far less waste to landfills, and the switch to every-other-week garbage pickup seems to have encouraged residents to recycle more, too.

Today, **the Portland City Council considered changes that could lead to enforcement** -- and even fines -- against scofflaws. One proposal would change city code to make it a violation to put the wrong thing in the wrong bin -- for example, putting pet waste in composting carts or plastic bags in recycling bins.

The council also looked at creating a way for residents to make anonymous complaints about violations. **The proposed rule is aimed at businesses that store big garbage containers on sidewalks**, but it would open the door to complaints about composting and other issues as well.

Portland is the only metro-area city with residential composting, but **Salem, Keizer** and Corvallis have it, as do Seattle and San Francisco.

### Tons of residential garbage collected in the first quarter of each year.



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### Is curbside composting working as intended?

The citywide program, started Oct. 31, seems to be outperforming the pilot program Portland launched in 2010. In the first quarter of 2012, haulers reported a 44 percent drop in residential garbage, by weight. In the pilot program, garbage dropped by 30 percent.

### Why is garbage dropping?

Residents are diverting food from their garbage bins. They're also recycling more, city officials said. In 2010, haulers collected about 30,000 tons of residential compost. They're projected to triple that amount in 2012, to 89,000 tons, according to the city's analysis.

### What's the effect on rates?

Garbage rates will go up July 1. **How much depends on a home's level of service.** But composting isn't to blame, and rates would have gone up more without the switch, according to the city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. It costs haulers far less to dump organic material, about \$54 a ton, than garbage, \$94 a ton. Taxes and fees are higher for garbage, and it often has to be taken farther.

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This year's rate increases are the result of a 2008 rule that requires haulers to replace aging trucks; higher fuel and labor costs; and a drop in prices on recyclable materials. Customers get an annual credit based on the global value of recyclable papers and metals; it's shrinking from \$1.10 a month to 73 cents.

### Are people adjusting?

The city's composting hotline is still ringing. But it had about 1,500 calls in May, down from a peak last fall of 6,500. Now, the top two categories of questions have nothing to do with composting, according to the city's tally. More than a third of callers ask, "Who's my garbage hauler?" Twelve percent ask about other city issues. About 10 percent have questions about rules such as, "Can I put paper plates in the composting bin?" (The answer is no.)

### Are some people having a hard time?

Haulers look for diapers in recycling bins and pet waste in composting carts. About 1,200 households out of 140,000 -- less than 1 percent -- have been caught using the wrong cart. Residents who mess up are supposed to get a note reminding them of the rules.

### **So what do people say?**

Parents with children in disposable diapers such as Holly Lenz of the Parkrose neighborhood are still complaining. "It's been tricky," said Lenz, who tried cloth diapers for her 2-year-old son but gave up; they leaked and restricted the baby's movement. So far, however, Lenz has been able to stay with the same size 32-gallon can. "I better get him potty trained before I have another one," she said.

### **What are the kinks?**

The city has always set weight limits on carts. Elaine Friedman, who lives in the Hillsdale neighborhood, learned that the hard way and was billed extra for a too-heavy composting bin filled mostly with yard debris. "I've always filled it to the top, and it's never been a question," said Friedman, who wonders how she's supposed to weigh her composting.

### **Have people switched to bigger cans?**

More people have 60-gallon cans now; that category has jumped almost 10 percent since fall, city calculations show. But people dropping back to every-four-week pickup spiked 9 percent. City numbers don't precisely capture how many people have altered their service; if anything, they may undercount switches. For example, if one person switches from a 35-gallon cart to a 60-gallon cart and the reverse also happens, the overall numbers wouldn't change.

### **What would it cost for the city to return to weekly trash pickup?**

Back-of-the-envelope analysis by the city shows rates would increase by about \$6 or \$7 per month, or about 25 percent, if everyone got weekly service back. But rates would rise by as much as 100 percent if fewer people opted in because the cost of running extra garbage routes would be divided among a smaller group. City officials will have more accurate numbers in fall when they review the program's first year.

### **Could the city start fining rule-breakers?**

If the City Council makes using the wrong cart a violation of Portland code, the next step would be to make rules for verifying violations and following up. Could fines follow? "There could be that, too," said Michael Armstrong, a sustainability manager for the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. Wednesday, Commissioners Randy Leonard and Amanda Fritz said that gave them pause, prompting Mayor Sam Adams to postpone a vote by one week.

### **Is curbside composting spreading in the metro area?**

Not yet. Gresham launched a commercial composting programs this year, and Beaverton and Hillsboro are

taking steps to do the same. But officials in the cities said they're not ready for residential composting.

-- **Beth Slovic**

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