

# Audit at a glance



## Residential Trash, Recycling, and Compost Services

NOVEMBER 2022

**ABOUT** | The Solid Waste Management Division provides trash, recycling, and compost pickup for about 180,000 Denver households. The division also responds to illegal dumping.

Our audit work occurred between February and July 2022, as the division sought City Council approval to change residential trash service to a volume-based pricing, or “pay as you throw,” model. In 2023, Denver households will pay for waste disposal based on the size of their trash carts. Recycling and compost services will be included at no extra charge.

## In the report

### **FINDING: The Solid Waste Management Division Lacks Strategic Direction and Quality Data to Inform How It Provides Services to Residents**

- The division does not have a detailed strategic plan or written policies and procedures to support efficient and effective service to the households it serves.
- The division cannot demonstrate how it changed service routes and pickup schedules in early 2022 — a change that was associated with a spike in resident reports of missed service.
- The division also uses flawed data to measure how well it responds to service requests.
- Overall, Solid Waste Management lacks guidance or strategic direction for its day-to-day operations. The division also has no connection to any long-range goals and objectives it is meant to achieve.

### **FINDING: The Solid Waste Management Division Has Insufficient Resources to Collect Residential Waste, Respond to Illegal Dumping, and Support Its Other Work**

- The division has unreliable and costly older trucks, with no systematic plan to replace them. Sixty percent of the trucks have already used up more than half of their estimated useful life.
- An aged fleet carries higher maintenance costs. Since 2019, the city has spent about \$3.5 million per year to maintain the waste collection trucks.
- Some drivers told us Solid Waste Management does not have enough trucks in good operating condition to run all scheduled routes.
- Driver vacancies increased in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. That shortage has continued, even as the city will need to hire more drivers in 2023.
- Meanwhile, the division lacks enough inspectors and support staff to address improper recycling and composting and teach the public about correct practices.

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- Already these issues are resulting in mandatory overtime for drivers, unfinished routes, missed pickups, and other service-delivery issues.

**FINDING: The City Is Inadequately Prepared for Its New Volume-Based Pricing Program, which May Worsen Existing Service-Delivery Issues for Residents**

- Volume-based pricing for trash collection is seen as the single-most effective and most cost-effective method for increasing the amount of waste diverted from landfills.
- However, before developing Denver’s upcoming program, officials did not follow leading practices to design the program with informed knowledge about how prepared the city is to expand recycling and compost service.

- Although city leaders have discussed a volume-based pricing option for more than a decade, the city collected minimal input from residents before the City Council approved the program in June 2022.
- The Solid Waste Management Division also did not follow leading practices to set the new trash fees – which may be too low to sustain the program long term or incentivize better waste diversion.
- Compared to other cities with similar volume-based pricing programs, Denver’s fees are significantly less while at the same time Denver will provide more frequent services.
- Officials cannot say whether they might have to raise trash fees to ensure the program is self-sustaining as they intend.

**Comparison of Volume-Based Pricing Programs in Denver and Other Cities**

✓ Yes ✗ No		Denver	Austin	Longmont	Loveland	Minneapolis	Phoenix	Salt Lake City	Seattle
SERVICES:	Compost Including food waste	✓	✓	✗ Pickup with a fee	✗	✓ Optional	✗	✓	✓
	Large item	✓ Every 4 weeks	✓ Twice per year	✗ Pickup with a fee	✗ Pickup with a fee	✓ Two items per pickup	✓ Once every 3 months	✓ Twice per year	✗ Pickup with a fee
	Recycling	✓ Weekly	✓ Every other week	✓ Every other week	✓ Every other week	✓ Every other week	✓ Weekly	✓ Weekly	✓ Every other week
MONTHLY FEES		\$0	\$4.60	\$2.96	\$10.25–\$12	\$25.08	\$0	\$0	\$7–\$13.40
CART CHARGES:	Small 32–48 gallons	\$9	\$23.90	\$6.50	\$7	\$2	N/A	\$17.80	\$42.15
	Medium 48–65 gallons	\$13	\$29.05	\$12.90	\$14	N/A	\$31.48	\$22.75	\$84.20
	Large 90–96 gallons	\$21	\$49.50	\$24	\$21	\$5	\$34.48	\$27	\$126.40
RANGE OF TOTAL MONTHLY CHARGES		\$9– \$21	\$27.25– \$54.10	\$9.46– \$26.96	\$13.75– \$33	\$27.08– \$30.08	\$31.48– \$34.48	\$17.80– \$27	\$33.45– \$139.80

**Note:** Austin, Loveland, and Seattle also offer even smaller cart-size options. We did not list them as they are not comparable to what Denver offers. The range of total monthly charges includes the rates for the smallest carts.

**Source:** Auditor’s Office staff analysis using data from the Department of Transportation & Infrastructure and other cities researched for this audit.

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