



City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 1, 2013

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

THROUGH: RASHAD M. YOUNG, CITY MANAGER 

FROM: NELSIE L. SMITH, DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT & BUDGET 

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO #4: RESPONSE TO COUNCIL QUESTIONS

Every Friday, the Office of Management & Budget will issue Budget Memos to answer questions posed by members of City Council. We will prepare the memos in a question and answer format. Below are answers to some of the questions posed thus far:

CHILD SAFETY SEATS

Question: “What would be the fiscal impact of training a few City employees to assist parents with child safety seat installation?”

Response: The Sheriff’s Office is in the process of developing a plan to conduct child safety seat inspections. During March and April 2013, three Deputy Sheriffs will attend training to obtain their certification. It is anticipated that two staff members will conduct inspections once a month on Saturdays from 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon at specific location to be determined. The initial start-up cost for this program will be approximately \$225 for three deputies at a cost of \$75 per certification training registration fee. The estimated cost for maintaining this program on an annual basis is \$5,100, which covers overtime costs for staff. These costs will be absorbed within the department’s overtime budget.

SOLID WASTE OPTIONS FOR CONDOS/PUDS

Question: “What are the options and fiscal impact of the following potential changes to our Trash and Recycling service:

a) Offering PUDs and Condominiums the ability to "buy into" City Trash and Recycling service.

- b) Offering curbside food waste and yard waste collection. Please include consideration of the cost changes as a result of the new Covanta agreement. What other options might for use of the savings generated from the new agreement?"

Response:

- a) On August 12, 2010, the Attorney General opined that Fairfax County may require residents to give up their private trash collection service and join the service provided by the County, and that a county may, but is not required to, allow residents to opt out of public trash collection service and maintain a parallel private collection service. Historically, homeowner associations and condominiums have chosen to opt out of City services for two reasons: (a) the perception of high costs (i.e. the City's \$336 annual refuse fee) and (b) the need to customize services for the specific location.

On average, single-family homes (with yards) generate more waste than do townhomes and condominiums so the cost of providing services tends to be lower. The City charges a flat rate to all customers regardless of the housing type, leading many larger townhouse and condominium developments to opt for private collection service. Additionally, many townhomes and condominiums receive services that are incompatible with the City's method of collection. These services include the provision of non-standard containers, multiple pickups or unusual service requirements due to unique site requirements. If the City were to offer associations or condominiums the ability to "join" the City services, the associations would have to either accept the City's service requirements or the City would have to consider significant capital and equipment investments such as automated/semi-automated (mechanical lift) or front-loading vehicles, vehicles with roll-up style doors and additional roll-off trucks to accommodate increased volume. The City's current refuse vehicles are all traditional, full-sized rear-loading units. The cost of the additional equipment and staffing required to operate it would depend on the type of development and is therefore unknown at this time. However, it is likely that the new service would cost more than the current household collection fee rate due to the required additional capital investments.

- b) The FY14 Proposed Budget requests funding for enhanced yard-waste services that may improve the City's recycling rate and lay the groundwork for future food waste composting. At this time, there is not a large-scale, food-waste processing facility in the metropolitan area. However, such a facility is

scheduled to open this summer. Staff has proposed the following to improve yard-waste management and take advantage of the savings generated from the new Covanta agreement:

- 1) Purchase (or lease) grinding equipment (a tub grinder) to replace the City's expensive contract grinding services. This will increase the City's capacity to allow year-round yard waste collection and more flexibility in managing storm debris.
- 2) Collect yard waste from residents with a dedicated truck. The City would introduce a new service – call-to-schedule brush collection – which would allow residents to dispose of yard debris and brush in a more sustainable manner. Yard waste/brush would no longer be accepted when placed in general refuse cans.
- 3) Collect grass trimmings with a dedicated truck. Residents would place grass in rigid containers or paper yard-waste bags. Grass must be kept separate from other yard waste because of its nitrogen content which makes it unsuitable for mulching (the City does not have a site that is currently permitted to accept grass due to the odor). Grass would be transported to the Gulf Branch Composting Facility in Upper Marlboro, MD. In 2014, that facility is expected to begin processing food waste. Because grass and food waste can be composted together, such a change would allow the Solid Waste Division to initiate a pilot program for food-waste recovery (most likely first for restaurants, groceries, and farmer's markets).

VOTER GUIDE

Question: “There was a budget memo (<http://alexandriava.gov/uploadedfiles/budget/info/budget2009/memos/memo85.pdf>) in FY 2009 that cited a \$55,000 annual cost for a mailed "Voter Guide" in advance of each election. Can you update that estimate and allow the Electoral Board to provide cost estimates for any other measures that they believe will increase voter turnout and information?”

Response: It is estimated that a first-class voter information mailing, similar to the one that was envisioned in 2008, would cost approximately \$65,000 per election with current postage and printing rates.

Other measures that have been taken to increase voter turnout and information include local elections moved from May to November. This resulted in an increased turnout for local offices. For instance, turnout for the office of the

Mayor increased from 10,922 in May 2009 to 65,213 in November 2012.¹ In addition, since 2008, the Registrar's Office has greatly expanded its use of free social media to provide voters with information about upcoming elections. This includes information on its web site; the City's web site; the City's Twitter Feed that reaches 6,088 individuals; the City Facebook page that reaches 9,055 individuals; and, an Alexandria E-News Group that provides election information, sample ballots to 2,308 individuals, and information through the City's E-News service that reaches approximately 25,000 individuals.

The FY 2009 memo provides more information on the limitations on the Electoral Board to maintain neutrality and not influence election outcomes.

¹ The Mayoral election is cited as an example because voters may cast only one vote for Mayor, whereas they may cast multiple votes for City Council members, and as a result the number of votes cast for Council members does not necessarily equate to the voter participation number.