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Petitions further the fight for trash privatization

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** Mike Schadek, the petition drive organizer, hopes to bring the issue of trash collection to a vote, while the city maintains it is committed to its contract with Inland Services Inc.*

By DONAVON CAMPBELL

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Upper Arlington residents upset by the privatization of the city's solid waste services officially filed petitions with the goal of putting an issue on the November ballot Friday, July 25 at the Municipal Services Center.

The hope is that the decision City Council made back in December to hire Inland Services Corp. and switch trash collection in Upper Arlington from a city-run service to a private venture can be overturned by popular vote, said petition organizer Mike Schadek.

"We're optimistic," Schadek said of potentially giving residents a chance to vote on the issue this fall.

Schadek said 2,030 people signed the petitions, well over the roughly 1,300 or more required -- however, the petition signatures must now be certified by the Franklin County Board of Elections. The petitions must be reviewed to confirm that signatures of enough registered voters from the last gubernatorial election were obtained.

"I think it's really encouraging; the fact that we got over 2,000 signatures," said Schadek. "I think it shows the level of dissatisfaction with the service."

Inland officially took over the city's waste pick-up services April 7 and was met with complaints. Accounts of sloppiness, miscommunication on routes and times, missed pick-ups and trucks running well into the evening hours were some of the issues cited in Inland's first months on the job.

The discovery that Inland had hired temporary employees without background checks -- one of whom, it was later found, had a criminal record -- and a traffic incident on April 14 on Tremont Road during which an Inland vehicle hit a parked pickup truck also fueled complaints with the company.

In what was perhaps the lowest point of the relationship between the company and the community, just 15 days into the transition process, a couple of unknown suspects left notes with racial slurs in a number of trash cans for Inland employees to find.

Still, city officials continue to work with the company and say that the current number of daily complaint calls and 'call backs' for missed trash are now back to pre-switch levels.

Deputy City Manager Emma Speight said city officials expected a rough ride with a city of more than 12,000 households making such a drastic change.

"Inland has worked very, very hard with the city," said Speight. "The city is constantly monitoring and will continue to do so."

Speight also said that, based on research by City Attorney Jeanine Amid-Hummer, Schadek's hope of seeing City Council's decision overturned is a slim one.



SNP photo by Ben French
Mike Schadek (left) and his attorney, Jim Becker, hand in petitions to put a ballot initiative regarding the privatization of Upper Arlington's trash on the November ballot Friday, July 25 at the city's finance department in the Municipal Services Center.

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It would be way too costly and time consuming of an undertaking at this point and in all likelihood the Ohio Supreme Court would rule to uphold the contract between Inland and the city, Speight said.

In a May 22 letter from Inland President Robert Smith to City Manager Virginia Barney, Smith offered up a 'no strings attached' annulment of the contract. City officials, however, said the offer was made in a moment of "frustration" during which both parties were airing a number of grievances about their arrangement.

Barney and Assistant City Manager Joe Valentino both verified the offer was made and said the offer was rescinded almost immediately, and that both sides have since been dedicated to making the relationship work.

Schadek said he sees that letter as a ray of hope.

"If they've offered it once, then I think we can get it again," said Schadek.

Even if Inland wouldn't offer a way out of the contract, should a ballot initiative make it to the voters and they approve reverting back to the old trash system, Schadek, also a lawyer, said the poor service, along with a number of other issues Inland has had, could stand as a breach of contract and he believes that would give the city the legal standing it would need to break the deal.

Schadek said he wants to get the solid waste workers back -- none of whom took jobs with Inland -- get the equipment back and get trash collection back up to snuff.

"Ultimately we want to bring back those (city) workers that did such a wonderful job," said Schadek. "We want to bring the workers back and restore the service and the safety.

"Upper Arlington residents deserve the best service and safety."

Schadek also said he would like to see elimination of the \$30 annual fee imposed on residents because of the switch.

As for the city's side of the issue, Speight said city staff is preparing for public consumption a fiscal breakdown of the costs of switching back in hopes that it will help shed some light on the realities of the situation as they see it.

Schadek said anyone interested in helping out or donating money to help with a potential fall campaign for a ballot issue can visit uatrash.org.

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