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Privatization of trash collection, racially-charged notes anger community

Steve Brown, WOSU News

COLUMBUS, OH (2008-04-23) Trash Collection, something many people take for granted, has caused quite a stir in Upper Arlington. Late last year city council voted to privatize trash collection and lay off some city workers. Since then residents have circulated petitions, started Web sites and held rallies. Things escalated even further last night Tuesday when the newly-contracted trash company filed a complaint with police for what they call ethnic intimidation.

The police report states that around 5:30 Tuesday night, a driver for Inland Services stopped on Cranford Road to empty three recycling bins. All three contained notes with various racial slurs directed at African Americans. William Lee is a manager with Inland, and oversees routes in Upper Arlington.

"Our crew is 99 percent African-American," Lee says. "I had hoped this would not come into play and be an issue in the job we're doing, and that is sanitation for the city of Upper Arlington. My men aren't politicians, activists or terrorists. They're simply men out doing their job."

First some background on Upper Arlington Trash. Up until this month City Workers collected residents' trash for a fee. But there was a perk. Residents did not have to walk their trash bags to the curb. For the same fee, they could leave bags next to their garage door and workers in a fleet of buggies would zip up the driveway and collect the bags.

Now that's changed. The buggies are still in use, but Upper Arlington privatized trash collection. Now if residents don't want to walk their bags to the curb, they have to pay extra - \$150 a year. Otherwise, the bags must go to the curb.

Assistant city manager Joe Valentino says the old system was getting too expensive. The new system saves Upper Arlington about \$200,000 a year.

The additional fee has angered residents but the toughest decision, Valentino says, was to contract an outside company, meaning he had to fire 20 city employees.

"That was painful, and still is painful," Valentino says. "Even within the morale of the city staff, we're still recovering from that. And we knew that."

What he didn't expect was such a strong pushback from some community members. Namely. Vicki Kerman

"I don't have any problems with Inland. I have a problem with our city government."

Kerman says she's never been the protesting type. She has two dogs, college-aged kids and a brick house in the heart of Upper Arlington. But she became upset when council passed the ordinance with an emergency clause. That means opponents cannot put the issue on the ballot without council approval.

Soon after the decision Kerman organized a rally in front of City Hall and founded www.uatrash.org. The site features several pictures of Inland trucks and crew members, allegedly committing violations like running routes too late in the evening and not properly emptying containers.

Kerman says she knew nothing of the racially charged notes, and finds them offensive. She says Inland is only "the battleground" in her fight against the city.

"Since they've ignored all of our opinions all of this time, and basically told us 'No, you cannot vote on this and will never vote on this,' now the battle ground becomes helping them identify 'Hey, you should have listened to us.'"

But Inland manager Lee says Kerman's criticism, directed at him or not, is unfair. He says it has racial undertones, which Kerman denies. He admits the transition has not been as smooth as he'd hoped. But he says drivers, less than three weeks into their new routes, are showing significant progress. That's good news for Kerman and the rest of Upper Arlington. The city's contract with Inland runs through 2013.