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Trucking shortage leads to garbage woes

July 2, 2014 by SARAH CRICHTON / sarah.crichton@newsday.com



Garbage is stockpiling on Long Island.

The backlog of an estimated 12,000 tons of baled garbage -- the light-green wrapped cubes of household and commercial waste that usually is trucked off the Island on the back of flatbeds -- is due in part to a trucking shortage.

A proposed quick-fix to take it off the Island, using sealed railcars, now awaits emergency authorization approval from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The situation has been brewing for a couple of weeks, according to industry representatives, carting companies and the DEC.

It is the result of several factors: increased rail freight that has led to a shortage of trucks coming to Long Island; the typical garbage summer surge as tourists and seasonals flock to the East End; and the fact that residents and businesses could not do as much cleaning up earlier in the spring because all the rain led to a later-than-usual rise in garbage volumes, they said.

"Heading into the holiday weekend, we have a real challenge, particularly out on the East End where if it's being collected, it's getting close to impossible to move it off the Island," said Michael White, an attorney who represents several Long Island solid waste service firms.

Interviews with garbage collection firms and haulers confirm some carters have been told their waste can no longer be accepted at their usual transfer facilities until the backlog clears.

DEC officials acknowledge the backup at facilities and are working toward a solution, but the department was unable to comment officially Wednesday night.

"We obviously want to avoid a situation where a garbage collector tells customers he can't collect because he's at capacity and then we have garbage left out on the street, becoming a public health hazard," a source said.

To get around the problem, one of the largest garbage management firms on Long Island, Omni Recycling of Babylon, is in talks with New York & Atlantic Railway, the Island's rail freight franchisee, as they try to secure the DEC emergency authorization that would permit the garbage to go by rail for between 30 and 60 days.

Omni has lined up specially sealed railcars it would load the garbage into at a rail spur for freight by New York & Atlantic.

Paul Victor, New York & Atlantic's president, said the railroad remained ready, willing and able to take the garbage. "It's obviously a crisis point and we'd like to help," he said.

Jay Wallace, the railroad's general superintendent, said by law railroads, if they have capacity, cannot deny service to any customer. "All the DEC has to do is ask us," he said. "We could strike the agreement but we need the permit."

If Omni gets the necessary approval, both Eastern Resource, which handles much of the East End's garbage, and Progressive Waste Solutions, which handles both commercial and residential garbage from the towns of Southold and East Hampton, would likely join in, sources said.

As of Wednesday, Progressive, which operates seven transfer stations on Long Island, already is at capacity at its facilities in Holtsville and Yaphank.

The emergency authorization, White said, would enable the logjam to be cleared within the 30 days. "This is a temporary solution to the backlog that's developed," he said. "But it's also clear a longer-term rail transport alternative for garbage is essential for Long Island."

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