

It's No Joke

This is for real. Today is the first day of automated refuse collection in the Centre Region Townships (and Benner Township). After 33 years of refuse haulers getting in/out of their vehicle at every stop and hand carrying refuse laden bags, cans and bundled materials to a compactor compartment on their truck, today our haulers start utilizing the latest technology in their field – automated arms mounted on the truck that will lift specialized containers, empty them into the truck and set them back at the curb, all operated from inside the cab. The switch to this latest technology required that all customers utilize containers specially designed for this type of collection, which had to be provided by the hauler.

These \$400,000+ vehicles operate on Renewable Natural Gas and are designed to increase productivity (stops collected per day), reduce labor costs (one person per vehicle) and reduce workers compensation claims. There is potential to reduce the number of collection trucks needed by as much as 33% (from 6 to 4).

Also new this year will be the elimination of two annual bulk waste collections. Those collections started as all waste and have evolved into waste and recyclables – scrap metal, electronics and tires are now separated and recycled instead of landfilled. In place of the semi-annual bulk waste weeks, residents will have the opportunity to schedule four bulk waste/recyclable collections per year, when it's convenient to them, and will not have to hold material until May or October. Although many customers have resisted the above two major contract changes, these changes were initiated by those hauling companies that expressed interest in bidding on this contract. Additionally, these changes were shown to be instrumental in keeping rate increases to a minimum (although no one likes any rate increase) in similar bid situations statewide. The increasing shortage of labor, especially truck drivers with commercial driver's licenses, has forced many refuse companies to go this route. Three other Centre County refuse haulers have already converted over to automated collection.

This is also the first time in over 20 years that customer lists needed to be transferred to a new contracted hauler. In 1992 that customer list was just under 8,000 homes, while today it exceeds 17,000 and includes townhouses, trailer parks, homeowner associations and gated communities. And more residents are living in more rural areas of these townships, with long driveways and private lanes that

make it difficult for collection vehicles to access yet alone perform collection services and then turn around.

And like all the changes in our lives, there are always unforeseen circumstances – and this change has seen its share. Some of the windiest days we’ve had all winter occurred on some cart distribution days, blowing away the informational hangers distributed with each container. Some of our educational materials have included an incorrect phone number (transposed numbers) despite those materials being reviewed multiple times. And most recently, a glitch in newly purchased software has delayed the timeline for customers to establish an online portal for paying their invoices.

So as this new technology rolls out today, please keep the following in mind:

- Retaining the prior hauler would have resulted in an additional monthly increase of \$7 to \$9.
- There were no bids for hand collection – only for automated collection.
- You can now schedule bulk collection at your convenience.
- You have plenty of time to pay your invoice – there will be no late payment penalties during this first quarterly billing – and we hope to have online payment available this week.
- There will be those who put containers in the wrong place, or leave materials outside the container or place them backwards so they can’t be tipped, frustrating the collection crews as much as the residents. But the drivers will do their best to collect everything possible.
- You’ll have plenty of time to switch out your container – so try the one you have for a few weeks before making a decision – and yes, we will take back used containers, so don’t worry about getting it dirty.
- Now there will be a local “office” where you can pay your bill in person or drop it off – at 253 Transfer Road. A drop off box will be at Gate 3, the entrance to our Administration Building.
- Last year (2024) was the first time the monthly rate exceeded the 1992 rate of \$20.50. Although these rates are higher, they are still some of the lowest in the state.

Let’s just all work together to eliminate the bumps as we find them, and work towards making this contract period turn into one as smooth as the ones of the last 33 years. We’ve hired additional staff to answer your phone calls, but if you encounter a busy signal or get voicemail, please be patient.

And for those of you that work during the day we're also going to hold a few "customer service open house" sessions at our office on 253 Transfer Road to meet our customer service people from the Authority, the Centre Region Council of Governments (contract administrator) and Burgmeier's Hauling Inc.(BHI). Those hours will be from 5 to 7 P.M. on Tuesday, April 15, Wednesday, April 16 and Thursday, April 17. If you want to pay your bill, look at different cart options or just meet and discuss, please come out and join us.

Ted Onufrak is the Executive Director of the Centre County Recycling and Refuse Authority (CCRRA). The CCRRA will be handling the billing and customer service needs for the Centre Region Council of Governments.