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[By Gordon Y.K. Pang](#)

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CRAIG T. KOJIMA / CKOJIMA@STARADVERTISER.COM

Bulky pick-up items at Konia and Apaki St. in Kalihi.





The city is addressing delays in refuse pickup service after a shortage of operating front-end-loading garbage trucks and a lack of people to collect bulky items left trash piling up for several days this week across Oahu.

Specifically:

» About 500 Dumpster-style bins, mostly from West Oahu condominium, apartment and business buildings that qualify for the city's front-end-loading refuse collection service, were left without service for as long as three days, city officials said. The biggest culprit was a shortage of operable front-end-loading trucks. The worst day was Tuesday when six of the city's seven front-end trucks were out for repairs, city Environmental Services Director Lori Kahikina said.

» Bulky items have been piling up on curbsides fronting homes and apartments from Honolulu to Makakilo for as long as 1 1/2 weeks due to a shortage of personnel, Kahikina said.

Palm Villas resident manager Phillip Huth and his staff breathed a sigh of relief Friday morning when a city front-loading truck rolled up to the apartment complex at about 8:30 a.m. to clear its 19 Dumpsters.

Instead of jumping into the bins to compact the piling garbage as they had been doing in recent weeks, "we were jumping for joy" at the sight of the trucks, he said.

Huth said there have been five to six times in the past five years when city crews were not able to collect refuse on a scheduled day and had to return the following day. Two weeks ago Friday pickup was skipped altogether, and the trash wasn't taken away until the following week's Tuesday pickup, he said.

Kahikina said several of her department's seven front-loading trucks have been down on any given day in recent weeks depending on how many the city Department of Facility Maintenance can get up and running.

"It varies, like maybe if one goes down, they'll give one up tomorrow, and maybe two more go down, they give me one backup," Kahikina said. The worst was Tuesday when all but one of the seven trucks were in the shop. Employees worked overtime to get the routes done that day, she said.

The city paid a private contractor \$12,730 to service five routes in Honolulu and West Oahu on Wednesday and Thursday, Kahikina said. It paid the same private hauler about \$9,000 two weeks ago.

As of Thursday five of the city's front-loading trucks were again operational, she said. But even then they were picking up trash scheduled for pickup two days earlier, she said.

The problem has existed since before she and the Caldwell administration arrived in office in January, Kahikina said. The average truck, which requires two people to operate, is about 3 years old.

Asked why the truck repairs have taken so long, city Facility Maintenance Director Ross Sasamura said his agency repairs approximately 205 refuse trucks, tractors and trailers daily. Parts that need to come from the mainland add to repair times, he said.

The two front-loading trucks now being fixed are in the hands of a private repair shop, Sasamura said.

The administration asked for funding to buy an eighth front-loading truck, which costs between \$200,000 and \$300,000, during this past spring's budget deliberations, but the request was shot down by the City Council.

Council Budget Chairwoman Ann Kobayashi said that's because the administration needs to give a clear-cut policy on which condominiums, apartments and businesses are eligible or whether to do away with refuse pickup service for all but single-family homes.

Some have questioned why only certain multifamily complexes, churches and businesses have been allowed to get pickup service when others have not, Kobayashi said.

"Let's look at the whole process first before we start buying more trucks," Kobayashi said Friday.

Kahikina said the criteria are spelled out and are based on "accessibility for our trucks to get to the bins, plus being able to maneuver easily on and off the property."

Huth said the city has been hauling away the trash from Palm Villas since he began as resident manager five years ago and objects to the idea that they should pay for a private service.

Like police and fire personnel, refuse disposal is a basic city service paid for with the money of property taxpayers like those in his complex, he said.

Huth said his greatest frustration is with the city's inability to tell its customers when pickup will be late or delayed until a following day.

While the lack of trucks has plagued the city's ability to deal with pickup at condominiums, apartments and businesses, it's a shortage of refuse workers and the piling up of big stuff long before pickup times that are to blame for delays in the city's bulky-item pickup schedule.

Kahikina said there are 23 vacancies in the Solid Waste Division, seven of which are refuse collector and crew leader positions. The situation was exacerbated by a hiring freeze instituted under former Mayor Peter Carlisle that only recently was lifted, she said.

Bulky-item routes and those in West Oahu are typically the last to be filled, she said, so the city does not have a full-time staff working the West Oahu bulky-item routes.

"What happens is those bulky items need to be done on overtime, and you cannot mandate employees to take overtime," Kahikina said. "So the guys do their regular routes, and then when they're done with their regular routes, they do bulky routes."

Additionally, she said, residents continue to violate city laws pertaining to bulky trash, which state that items should only be placed curbside for pickup no earlier than 24 hours before a scheduled monthly collection period. (The city gives itself three to four days from the scheduled day to collect the bulky items.)

"As soon as we pick it up ... they just dump some more, and we just cannot keep up," Kahikina said.

A city ordinance that took effect several years ago allows the city to fine property owners up to \$250 each time illegal items are left on the curb earlier than 24 hours, but the city is reluctant to enforce the law given its own delays in picking up bulky trash, Kahikina said.

The city hopes to catch up with its schedule soon and begin enforcement, which Kahikina said she hopes will curb the amount of illegal bulky items left on the curb.

Kahikina said she does not believe bulky trash has been left out for months. "People are illegally putting items out, and it may look like one month out because it's out when it's not supposed to be out."

The problem has been an ongoing fight for members of the McCully-Moiliili community who at one point formed a committee to report on property owners who violated the bulky-item laws.

McCully-Moiliili Neighborhood Board Chairman Ron Lockwood said scheduling is a key reason why bulky items are left out early in an area heavily populated by ever-transient college students.

Most apartment dwellers vacate their units at the end of a month, while bulky-item pickup in the area is scheduled for the third week of the month, meaning trash is often left out way before the scheduled removal time.

In such cases it's supposed to be the responsibility of the property owners to store the vacated items hidden away on their own properties until the scheduled pickup times.

Art Key, a resident manager in the Punchbowl area, said he follows the rules but is frustrated that the bulky items continue to not get picked up when scheduled.

Key said items have been left up to three weeks after scheduled pickup times. Once he calls to complain, a pickup usually occurs within two or three days, he said, "but we shouldn't have to call."

Kobayashi said it may be time for the city to consider hiring a private contractor to do all bulky-item pickup.

"But, of course, the unions aren't going to like that," she said.

Councilman Stanley Chang, who heads the Council's Public Works Committee, said the Council has held meetings and taken steps to address the issues, including approving the purchase of new equipment and parts for the trucks.

It may be time to hold new meetings, he said.