



Safety, Wellness, and Youth Committee Memorandum

City of Arts & Innovation

TO: SAFETY, WELLNESS, AND YOUTH COMMITTEE **DATE: JANUARY 15, 2025**

FROM: PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT **WARDS: ALL**

SUBJECT: SHOPPING CART RETRIEVAL PROGRAM UPDATE

ISSUE:

Provide an update on the Shopping Cart Retrieval Program

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Safety, Wellness, and Youth Committee receive a report and provide input on the current state of the Shopping Cart Retrieval Program.

BACKGROUND:

On September 18, 2024, the Public Works Department proposed in-housing shopping cart retrieval as an alternative approach to managing abandoned shopping cart retrieval, aimed at improving service efficiency. The Committee preferred to continue with outsourced services. The Committee asked Public Works to monitor the current program's efficiency and return with an update.

This report provides an update on recent program improvements intended to reduce response times, optimize service requests, and provide for broader outreach to retailers and the community, better data collection, and improved cross-departmental collaboration.

DISCUSSION:

30-Day Data Gathering

In late October 2024, the Public Works Department met with the City Manager's Office, Housing & Human Services Department staff, and Police Department staff to discuss current procedures for shopping cart retrieval to gain a better understanding of the scope of the citywide issue and identify gaps that may cause an ineffective response to errant shopping carts.

Through conversation, the group learned that data is limited to what is gathered by the Public Works contractor; Public Safety Engagement Team (PSET), Riverside Police Department (RPD),

and Public Works Mitigation (illegal dumping) lacked data on the number of carts they encounter and the frequency.

Public Works committed to provide a Street Maintenance Worker for a 30-day period to gather data and augment shopping cart retrievals. At the beginning of this 30-day period, Public Works staff expected

- That a gap in collection may be due to carts that are not empty and are outside of the scope of work of the Public Works' contractor
- That there may be challenges in the flow of information between the Call Center, Public Works, PSET, and the Public Works' contractor.

More data was expected to clarify whether abandoned carts are empty, contain trash, or appear to belong to individuals, aiding City efforts to better understand the issue and how to tackle it.

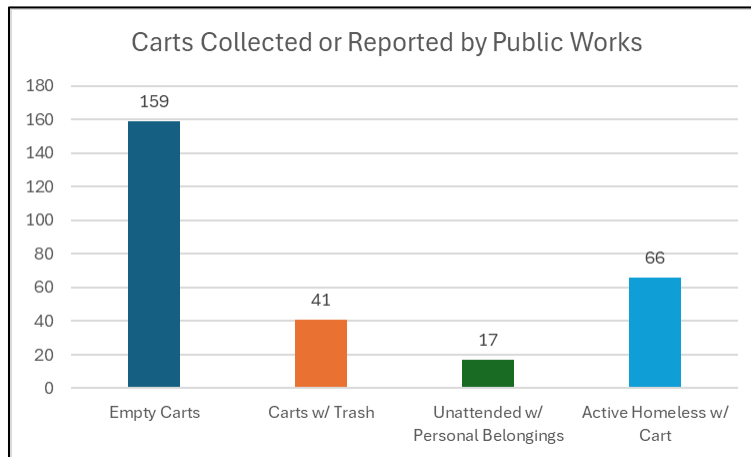
Data Gathered

The 30-day data gathering period provided valuable insights into the types of carts found, their locations, and the logistics of cart retrieval.

Public Works categorized shopping carts into four groups:

1. Empty, abandoned shopping carts
2. Shopping carts containing trash
3. Unattended shopping carts containing personal belongings
4. Shopping carts actively used by individuals experiencing homelessness

Details showing number of carts retrieved by retailer, cart locations, and cart condition are provided as an attachment to this report. The number of carts collected or reported by the Public Works Street Maintenance Worker during this period is summarized in the following chart:



Other notable data gathered included:

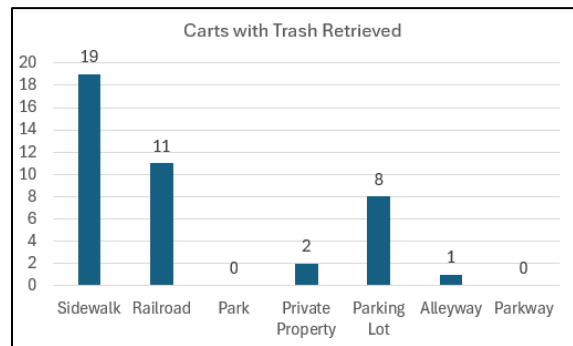
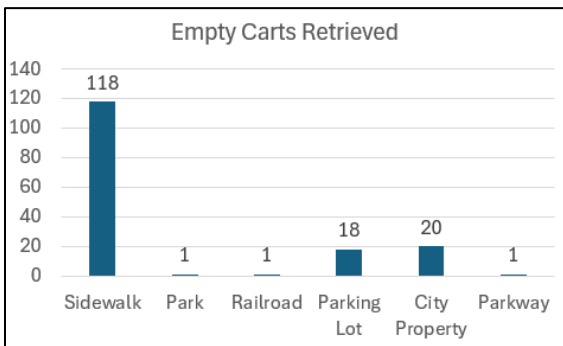
- An average of 14 empty carts were collected daily (this is in addition to the approximately 22 empty carts collected daily by the Public Works contractor).
- 74% of the empty carts were found on public rights-of-way
- Approximately 67% of the empty carts did not have locking devices
- 96% of the carts were in good working condition and were returned to retailers

The Public Works Street Maintenance Worker systematically patrolled the city to retrieve empty, abandoned shopping carts, focusing mainly on known hot spots. The collected carts were loaded onto a stake bed truck and transported to the City Corporation Yard. Retrieval details for each cart were documented using the Public Works “Riverside Incident Service Request” (RISR) application, an internal mobile application developed by Public Works staff and recently launched for use by the Graffiti Crew, which was temporarily modified by the City’s IT Department to facilitate cart reporting.

The Street Maintenance Worker also reported shopping carts that were not empty. Shopping carts that had trash in them were collected by the Solid Waste Mitigation Crew, who also proactively collects these shopping carts when responding to illegal dumping service requests. A total of 41 carts were categorized as carts containing trash (daily average of just under 4 carts, or 14% of all shopping carts). These carts contained an estimated 10 cubic yards of trash; for context, this is the same volume as a Public Works Streets Division dump truck:



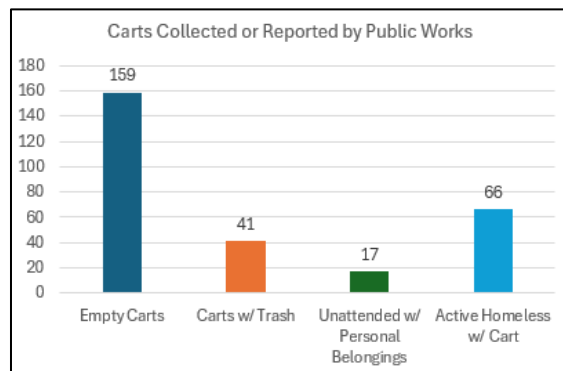
The following charts summarize the retrieval locations of shopping carts that were empty or contained trash.



During the month of November 2024, the Homeless Outreach team made contact with 1,430 homeless individuals; shopping carts were noted during 116 of these contacts, and no services were accepted during any of these 116 contacts. As a result, these carts were not retrieved as Outreach is not consistently accompanied by PSET Code Enforcement due to staffing limitations.

Public Works reported an average of just over 7 carts each day that were either actively in use by individuals experiencing homelessness or were unattended containing personal belongings. Nearly 30% of all carts identified during this 30-day period fell into these two categories and daily reports detailing the carts’ locations were sent to the Homeless Outreach team. However, due to vacant positions, higher-priority encampment cleanups, and the large volume of interactions with homeless individuals, Homeless Outreach and PSET staff were unable to respond to these reports from Public Works. Additionally, many homeless individuals with shopping carts were

transient, making it challenging to offer services or retrieve the carts from their reported locations. The following chart provides a breakdown of carts encountered on an average day:



Lessons Learned

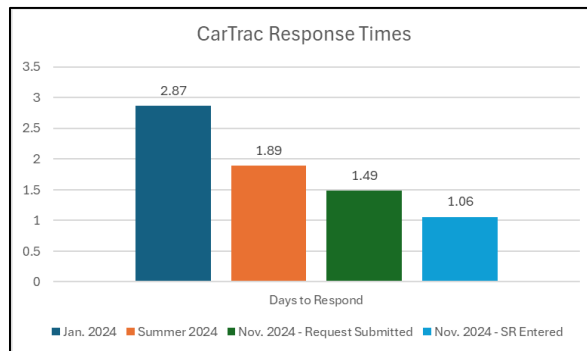
- Public Works staff found that it is difficult to locate carts based on location descriptions in service requests.
- The current 311 system lacks the functionality to attach photos to service requests. As a result of this limitation, staff have to call the Call Center and ask a rep to email the photo to them. Staff may also have to email the photo to the contractor when the contractor is looking for a cart. This limitation is one of the reasons that Public Works staff decided to develop a mobile app (RISR) to enable the Graffiti Crew, which relies heavily on photos to locate graffiti, to have easier, faster access to photos.
- Empty carts reported to the Call Center are often moved from the original location described in the service request by the time staff or contractor responds to the original location.
- Carts left behind after an individual accepts Outreach services are not being reported.
- Abandoned carts with personal belongings in them are underreported.
- Many carts are actively used by transient individuals to carry their personal belongings. Public Works staff reported these to Outreach, but these individuals are not stationary, making it challenging to respond to these reports.
- Carts with trash in them are underreported, though Public Works Mitigation proactively retrieves these carts when possible.
- PSET currently has limited staffing with 1 Code Officer assigned to the river bottom (Wildlands) and 2 assigned to public right-of-way areas (Urban). The staff assigned to the Urban region have staggered schedules, meaning only 1 of these employees are out in the field at any given time.
- Public Works pulled a Street Maintenance Worker away from the paving crew and does not have staff resources available to dedicate to long-term, full-time shopping cart retrieval.

Efforts to Improve Response Times

In early 2024, response times for the Public Works contractor, CarTrac, averaged 2.87 days from the time a service request (SR) was opened to the time they retrieved a cart, resulting in opportunity for abandoned carts to become nuisances in public areas. Recognizing the need for a faster response, Public Works staff began analyzing processes and engaging in daily written and verbal communication with CarTrac in an effort to identify and mitigate factors contributing to delays. As a result of these frequent conversations and increased monitoring, CarTrac's response time improved to an average of 1.89 days by late Summer 2024.

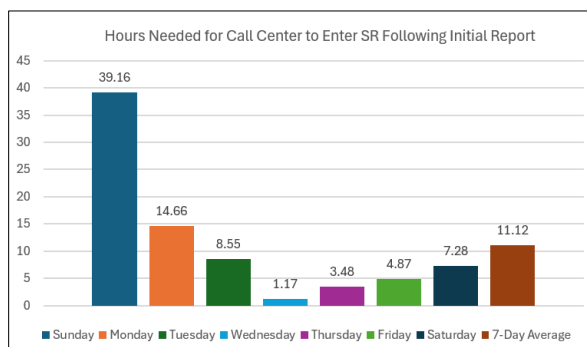
Public Works identified areas necessitating improvement after analyzing the reporting process for service requests and finding that the City’s process of reporting abandoned carts to CarTrac was resulting in delayed response times. Public Works staff learned that SRs were processed through a time-consuming method in which City Call Center representatives logged requests first into the 311 system, then manually re-entered the details into CarTrac’s online portal. CarTrac would receive the SR only after it had been entered into their portal. During peak periods, Call Center representatives have no more than 25 seconds between calls for any follow-up actions, including entering an SR into the CarTrac portal. Due to this process and large volumes of calls received by the Call Center, there were significant delays, sometimes as long as 36 hours, from when an SR was received by the Call Center to when Call Center staff entered an SR into the CarTrac portal and the contractor received the information.

Public Works staff worked with the Call Center to adjust this process and eliminated the step requiring SR submittal into CarTrac’s portal. Service requests are now sent directly to CarTrac via email as soon as they are entered in the 311 system. This change allows CarTrac’s dispatcher to relay requests to drivers much sooner after receiving an SR from the City. In the four weeks following this adjustment, CarTrac’s average response time when measured from when the Call Center initially received the request from a caller dropped to 1.49 days. When measured from when CarTrac received the SR from the Call Center, their response time drops to 1.06 days.



Public Works staff continued to study the shopping cart reporting process and identified additional factors contributing to delayed response times for service requests. In the four weeks after adjusting the reporting process, the Call Center took an average of 11.12 hours to enter an SR and forward it to CarTrac after receiving the initial request from a constituent. Excluding requests received on Sundays (when the Call Center is closed) the average processing time dropped to 7.27 hours. This delay is largely attributed to the high volume of daily requests handled by the Call Center, which processed over 58,000 SRs for the Public Works Department alone from January through November 2024, including 1,119 for shopping carts.

The following table summarizes the hours needed by the Call Center to enter shopping cart service requests after receiving the initial request:



Community Outreach and Education

Public Works has partnered with the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce to facilitate information sessions for retailers in Wards 1, 4, and 6 during the first quarter of 2025. These Wards were selected as they tend to be the “hot spots” for abandoned shopping carts due to a large retail presence. These sessions will provide retailers with an opportunity to meet Public Works staff, receive information about the Riverside Municipal Code and shopping cart retrieval program requirements, and engage in conversation about challenges and opportunities.

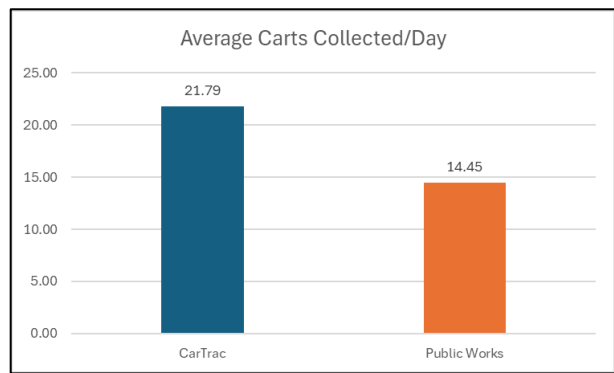
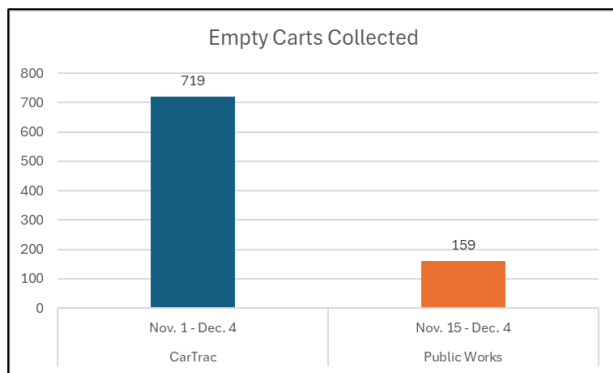
The City aims to foster collaborative partnerships that prevent cart abandonment from the outset. According to the California Grocers Association (CGA), one shopping cart with locking devices costs a retailer \$200-\$400 on average. Through the City’s retrieval program, a retailer incurs a cost of \$20 per delivery of shopping carts, regardless of how many carts are delivered at a time. By working together, to ensure locking devices are installed and an effective retrieval program is in place, the City and retailers may be able to reduce the number of errant shopping carts. Staff is also looking forward to learning from the retailers whether they believe the program is beneficial.

Staff will also work with the City Business Tax Division to explore options for information on the shopping cart program to be provided when City business licenses are renewed. Another potential opportunity is for ad space in the Explore Riverside magazine, to help inform the public on what to do when an abandoned cart is noticed.

Public Works Contract

Concurrent with data gathering and ongoing review of the cart retrieval program, Public Works is advancing a new agreement with CarTrac to the full City Council for approval. In FY23/24, the contractor retrieved nearly 10,000 empty carts and Public Works does not have the resources to effectively retrieve the large volume of abandoned carts independent of using a contractor whose sole focus is cart retrieval.

CarTrac significantly outperformed Public Works during the 30-day study, collecting more than four times the number of shopping carts during this period. Operating with two vehicles, the company provides proactive cart retrieval and responds to service requests seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Unlike Public Works, CarTrac also delivers collected carts directly to retailers, a service beyond Public Works’ capacity. Additionally, CarTrac’s extensive network enables them to mobilize extra resources when needed. This was demonstrated by their ability to deploy additional trucks and staff from nearby cities to deliver the carts collected by Public Works to their respective Riverside retailers.



Prior to November 2024, CarTrac averaged 22.86 carts collected per day. In November 2024, this average was 21.79 carts per day. Public Works augmented CarTrac’s efforts, yet their

average number of carts collected per day remained relatively unchanged. Together, Public Works and CarTrac collected over 36 carts per day on average.

CarTrac has indicated its ability to increase cart collection efforts is limited only by the value of the City's contract. Public Works plans to request additional change order authority to provide CarTrac with flexibility to collect more carts, as their past contract was capped at \$120,000 per year, or \$10,000 per month (which is an average of 500 deliveries of carts per month). Staff anticipates that the program cost recovery rate of approximately 99.8% in FY23/24 will remain unchanged and will monitor this closely. If needed, staff will return to the Committee to discuss changing the Riverside Municipal Code section that sets the amount charged to retailers for the delivery of recovered shopping carts.

Recently, Public Works staff learned that the California Grocers Association (CGA), a Sacramento-based nonprofit, statewide trade association that represents and advocates on behalf of over 150 grocery supply companies and 300 retailers with more than 6,000 stores throughout the state, is the sole shareholder of Retail Marketing Services, Inc., which includes CarTrac among its business divisions. According to CGA, member supermarkets include Albertsons, Bristol Farms, Cardenas Markets, El Super, Food 4 Less, Gelson's Markets, Stater Bros, and many independent grocery stores across California.

In addition to media relations support, advocacy at the State and local level, and assistance with navigating regulatory compliance issues related to the grocery industry, CGA members have access to services provided by CarTrac. CGA's retail partners benefit from CarTrac's core offerings that include cart repair, cart replacement, and cart retrieval. According to CGA, CarTrac is the industry leader in shopping cart retrieval, alleviating retrieval aggravation and ultimately helping their customers reduce expenses incurred from the loss of assets. CartFix, their cart maintenance support program, helps member retailers reduce cart replacement and overall maintenance costs. This service lowers the costs of new cart acquisition and prolongs expected cart life.

Additionally, CarTrac's relationship with national retailers, including its national contract with Target, underscores its industry reach. This clearer view of CarTrac's scope helped Public Works understand why competition may be limited for a local agreement with the City of Riverside.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This item contributes to **Strategic Priority 6 – Infrastructure, Mobility & Connectivity** and **Goal 6.2 – Maintain, protect, and improve assets and infrastructure within the City's built environment to ensure and enhance reliability, resiliency, sustainability, and facilitate connectivity.**

This item aligns with each of the Cross-Cutting Threads as follows:

1. **Community Trust** – The retrieval of abandoned shopping carts enhances the aesthetic appeal of our community and fosters a sense of responsibility and orderliness throughout the City.
2. **Equity** – Project outcomes will benefit the entire community.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – Consistent and timely retrieval of abandoned shopping carts demonstrates efficient use of resources.

- 4. **Innovation** – This item is neutral toward this Cross-Cutting Thread.
- 5. **Sustainability and Resiliency** - Project improvements aid our sustainability initiatives by minimizing waste and promoting responsible resource management among retailers, thereby contributing to a more resilient environment.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact associated with this report.

Prepared by:	Alex Rendon, Administrative Analyst
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Availability of funds:	Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/Assistant Chief Financial Officer
Approved by:	Kris Martinez, Assistant City Manager
Approved as to form:	Jack Liu, Interim City Attorney

Attachments:

- 1. Details of carts retrieved by retailer, location, and cart condition
- 2. Heat Map – 30-Day Public Works Shopping Cart Data
- 3. Heat Map – Service Requests 1/1/23-9/30/24
- 4. Presentation