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Why your trash is getting picked up late in the Inland Empire



Riverside employee Carlos Albidrez picks up green waste trash bins Thursday, Dec. 9, 2021. Trash pickups have been delayed in the city because of a shortage of drivers. A similar issue has created delays in other parts of the Inland Empire as well. (Photo by Will Lester, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

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It was another trash pickup day in the Inland Empire's largest city — and another day when bins overflowing with recyclable items were left untouched.

As a result, people living in a neighborhood straddling Riverside's Victoria Avenue had to wait until the following day, Wednesday, Dec. 1, to roll those blue containers back up the driveway.

That's been the pattern for many weeks now and City Council Member Ronaldo Fierro has been getting a lot of calls from residents about it.

"Those everyday city services, when they stop working, it's the No. 1 issue that people have," Fierro said.

In some cases, Deputy Public Works Director Nathan Mustafa said, Riverside residents wait up to three days for trash bins to be emptied.

Delays have been occurring in other Inland Empire cities besides Riverside. Officials blame the problem on swelling trash volume and a stubborn shortage of drivers that has plagued not only the region, but the state and nation as well.

Pandemic helped fuel driver shortage

"From the East Coast to the West Coast, there have been similar issues to what we are facing locally with a shortage of commercial drivers," said Alex Braicovich, senior regional vice president for the Perris-based CR&R Environmental Services.

The coronavirus pandemic has played a role, as it has in many other trends.

"I know everybody's tired of hearing about the pandemic," Braicovich said. "But it's affected all of us."

CR&R picks up neighborhood trash in the Riverside County cities of Temecula, Wildomar, Lake Elsinore, Canyon Lake, Perris, San Jacinto, Hemet and Calimesa, as well as in parts of unincorporated Riverside County and the San Bernardino County communities of Loma Linda, Colton, Phelan, Wrightwood and Piñon Hills. Collection delays are often seen in those places, though rarely longer than 24 hours and not as often as in summer, Braicovich said.

"It was a rough summer," he added.

The company has hired drivers since, but isn't back to pre-pandemic staff levels, Braicovich said.

The driver shortage looms as haulers brace for a seasonal spike in waste volume. According to Stanford University, Americans throw away about 25% more stuff between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day than at other times.



"We're all crossing our fingers and hoping we don't have issues after the holidays," Braicovich

The problem also persists as Californians prepare for the arrival of a new law next month requiring that food waste to be placed in green-waste bins for recycling instead of thrown out with garbage.

Some areas see few delays

While the problem has affected some Inland Empire communities, others are seeing little or no interruption.

Redlands, which like Riverside has its own in-house solid waste division, is short three drivers out of 28 positions, city spokesperson Carl Baker said.

“We have had a couple of vacancies that we’re filling that’s caused real minor delays on a couple of routes, nothing more than like a half hour to an hour delay — probably nothing that would be noticeable to our customers,” Baker said.

Ontario spokesperson Dan Bell said his city’s waste department is fully staffed and “we’re on schedule.”

Corona residents, who are served by Waste Management of the Inland Empire, experienced delays earlier in the pandemic, Corona Mayor Wes Speake said.

“It created a lot of confusion, as people would call and ask, ‘Was there a city holiday yesterday?’” he said.

Speake said there are few delays now — and few complaints.

Mustafa, the Riverside deputy public works director, said recently that the city had 26 drivers, well short of the 36 it has when fully staffed.

Help is on the way. Six new drivers are starting this month and the city continues to recruit to fill the gap, Mustafa said. The city hopes to eliminate collection delays in early 2022, he said.

Throwing more trash worsens problem

It’s not just the driver shortage that’s causing the problem. Residents are tossing out more stuff.

With many people working from home, Mustafa said, more residents are tackling do-it-yourself projects and ordering products online that are delivered with boxes and other packaging. As a result, the amount of waste Riverside residents put out at the curb in 2020 shot up by more than 12% from the year before.

“It means that our trucks are filling up more often,” he said. “We are making more runs.”



Besides generating more residential trash, the surge in online shopping has created a need for more truck drivers to deliver those products, according to the Solid Waste Association of North America. The driver shortage has become “more severe” in the last six months in large part due to the increased demand for drivers in the goods movement sector of the economy, Mustafa said.

The shortage has been compounded by the coronavirus spread, which has sickened drivers and prevented them from driving their routes, he said.

Then there is the supply-chain bottleneck, Braicovich said, that is slowing product delivery and sidelining trash-collecting trucks.

“We literally have trucks sitting for weeks, and sometimes months, because we are waiting for parts,” Braicovich said. “That problem is getting worse, not better.”

In Riverside, residential trash pickup days are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, depending on one’s neighborhood.

When the city doesn’t collect all trash in a particular neighborhood, drivers work overtime on a Wednesday or Saturday to empty the bins that were missed a day or two earlier, Mustafa said, adding that those overtime assignments are voluntary.

City spokesperson Phil Pitchford said that, on a typical trash day, trucks pick up regular trash and green waste where he lives, leaving his recyclable items for the following day.

“And sometimes they get all three,” he said.

RIVERSIDE RESIDENTIAL WASTE

2018

Trash: 50,045.42 tons

Recycling: 13,607.04 tons

Green: 30,259.61 tons

Total: 93,912.07 tons

2019

Trash: 51,847.31 tons

Recycling: 13,602.36 tons

Green: 30,811.95 tons



Trash: 57,900.14 tons

Recycling: 15,174.82 tons

Green: 35,292.29 tons

Total: 108,367.25 tons

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