

THE WAR ON EFFICIENT TRASH COLLECTION

Normally, I wouldn't get into a shouting match between John Cole and his poster ED Kain. John started it when he objected to a revolt against a city council decision to contract with just one trash collector.

Our entire nation has collectively lost its shit:

A Valley community's decision to change the way trash is picked up provided further proof of how deeply the nation's anti-government, "tea party"-fueled sentiment is running. A decision by the Fountain Hills Town Council to hire a single trash hauler and begin a curbside recycling program has been met with angry protests from residents who accuse town leaders of overstepping their bounds and taking a leap toward socialism.

Some even likened it to "Obamacare" for garbage, calling it "trashcare."

[snip]

This is how the American empire will end. With us rioting in the streets over the right to choose a trash collector, while the top 5% laugh all the way to the bank.

Followed by Kain hailing choice.

Naturally, I disagree entirely with John's argument on trash collection. It may be a small issue – so long as your trash is collected, it doesn't really

matter *that much* who picks it up – but the Tea Partiers are right this time: having choice is a *good* thing, even for trash collection. If the government came in and said “You can only buy Dell computers from now on” people would be unhappy. We want to be able to choose what kind of computer we buy – and not just because maybe we prefer Apple, but because we know that competition keeps innovation up and prices down. Now, in trash collection you probably won’t see too much innovation, but competition will keep prices down and quality of service high. If you don’t like the people picking up your trash, or the containers they provide, or the driver is rude, or whatever – you can switch.

Once the government has granted a monopoly, however, you’re stuck. It doesn’t matter what level of service you receive, whether prices go up – you have no choice. Many of us already have no choice when it comes to trash collection, so this is sort of a foreign concept. And that’s also why this isn’t really that big of a deal. Trash is basically a public utility in many places, and it works pretty well that way.

But I’m going to wade into this trash debate because it’s something I’ve been thinking a lot about lately. As you probably know, I recently moved from an idyllic left wing small city to an idyllic right wing small city. Both are great places to raise a family, both have charming downtowns, and both support diverse local businesses. One big difference, I’ve come to learn, is that the left wing city provides high quality public services—including single stream curbside recycling, best-in-state public schools, and well-developed social services, whereas the right wing city has privatized those same functions, with “choice” in trash

collection, a significant reliance on religious schools (this is one of the hotbeds of voucher activism), and church groups providing many of the social services.

Now, as it happens, I still live in a complex with dumpsters; I've got no choice in trash collection because my landlord chose a collector for me. Which means I've got to pay a yearly fee with the county for the privilege of driving my recycling to a dumpster a few miles away. Which also means I can't speak to this wondrous choice that Kain says we might have in trash collection firsthand.

But I will say this. First, it is a significant pain in the ass, on trash day, to have 4 different sets of trash collectors holding up traffic four different times on the same damn roads, because four different companies are picking up trash in the same area. This is not a dense area, which means you've got miles and miles and miles of duplicated truck routes, all in the name of this glorious "choice." Each of those duplicative four truck routes cost money (and of course none of them have the automated pick up that might be affordable if a city awarded a monopoly for the pickup), which I presume makes the cost to consumer much higher. Of course, the way to avoid all this duplication in an idyllic right wing small city, is to push everyone into developments with CCRs, so the development can band together and offer a monopoly to one trash collector, thereby avoiding the four sets of trash trucks, but not the potential for corruption. Choice is not all it's made up to be, particularly for services with a huge upside on efficiency.

As for me, I have honestly studied which townships offer trash collection—and particularly whether they offer curbside recycling. Because I've discovered out here that the real choice you've got—certainly the choice to have some kind of efficiency in trash collecting—comes when you select your house, because once you've picked, you're locked into

inefficiency.

(And don't even get me started on sidewalks.)