

DUMPSTER DODGING  
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The Portland City Council isn't eager to take on this issue, but the ombudsman is right to nudge it forward

Recently, city ombudsman Michael Mills went out to dinner at a Northwest Portland restaurant on a lovely evening. He wanted to dine al fresco, but he wound up going inside. Diners at sidewalk tables, he noticed, were enjoying a fabulous view -- of the restaurant's trash dumpster.

Unfortunately, this isn't an isolated instance. Walk around and you'll begin to agree with the ombudsman that too many giant trash dumpsters are hogging city sidewalks.

Some pose a health and safety hazard, by obstructing walkers, but most are just unappealing. They "uglify" their surroundings, in effect canceling out street trees and amenities the city has installed on purpose to create a pedestrian-friendly cityscape. About 15 years ago, former Mayor Bud Clark tried to stop the spread of trash dumpsters on public right-of-way, but they keep on proliferating.

True, they may not jump out at you until you start paying attention. Then, at best, they appear big and unwieldy, but closed and tidy. At worst, however, they are heaped to overflowing, smelly, disgusting and a magnet for rats.

Dumpsters have spread on Portland sidewalks for a number of reasons, but the city itself bears some of the blame. In general, trash containers are supposed to be kept on private property, either indoors or screened if they are out of doors, and many businesses manage just fine to live up to these guidelines. But city policies are somewhat confusing. Overlapping enforcement duties, too, have left city bureaus unable to take the lead in addressing the problem.

When businesses expand, the Bureau of Development Services should be insisting that they retrofit adequate space for trash, but the bureau isn't doing this consistently, according to a report by the ombudsman's staff. And the transportation bureau should be keeping public rights of way clear, but it's been reluctant to crack down on dumpsters, because of ambiguities in the rules.

Smaller trash containers rolled out and emptied more frequently may be the answer, but that can also be more expensive. Still, as the ombudsman's report notes, Philadelphia and Seattle have come up with innovative solutions. Some Portland businesses have already come up with their own innovative approaches, too, which other businesses may be able to learn from or imitate.

The Portland City Council needs to start by sorting out overlapping bureau responsibilities, and clarifying that dumpsters are banned on public right-of-way. Mills and his staff recommend a very gentle approach: They say the the council should launch a two-year process involving neighbors, bureaus and businesses -- those breaking the rules and those complaining about rule-breakers -- in brainstorming solutions.

This sounds like a fair, prudent, Portland way to go. Commissioners haven't been especially eager to, well, dive into this dumpster issue, but the ombudsman is right to push them. Dumpsters aren't going to magically disappear. They're going to keep multiplying.

It's time to stop dodging dumpsters, and start doing something about them.

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