

ITEM #:	37
DATE:	08-25-26
DEPT:	PW

COUNCIL ACTION FORM

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON RESIDENTIAL CURBSIDE RECYCLING COLLECTION - ALLEYS

BACKGROUND:

On March 10, 2026, the City Council awarded a contract to Aspen Waste Systems of Iowa, of Ames, IA to begin residential curbside recycling collection. Service began on July 2, 2026 to all single-family and multi-family properties of up to four or fewer units. This totals 13,461 properties in the City of Ames.

Under the contract, the City pays Aspen for each eligible property whether the household chooses to participate in the program or not. Therefore, the fee charged by the City to the eligible properties (\$7.75 per month) is likewise charged whether the household participates or not.

Aspen relies on the use of automated side-loading (ASL) trucks for the program. This equipment utilizes a robotic arm to reach the recycling cart, lift, and tip it into the hopper of the truck. The cart is then lowered and replaced at the curbside. This allows the ASL trucks to be operated by a single driver and provide highly cost-effective service delivery.

In comparison, garbage service in the community is provided by separate private haulers. Those haulers that collect garbage in alleys use rear-load collection trucks for that purpose. These trucks can be significantly smaller and rely on both a driver and helper,. The helper physically moves the carts from curbside to the semi-automated lifter on the back of the truck, then returns the emptied cart back to the curb.

As the recycling collection program began in July 2026, it became apparent that servicing the recycling carts was an issue for customers whose properties were located along alleys. After carts were delivered, these customers were instructed to place their carts along the street side for collection (not in the alley).

To date, staff has received concerns from 27 residents about not being able to have their recycling carts serviced in an alley. An additional eight customers who have alley access have voluntarily chosen to opt-out of the collection program and have had their cart removed. These include residents that have reached out to City Council members in addition to staff.

ALLEY CHARACTERISTICS AND CHALLENGES

There are 82 city blocks that have alley access. These 82 blocks contain roughly 1,000 total properties. The type of access varies from property-to-property. Even in the same alley there can be a mix of properties that have:

1. Alley access, but no street access,
2. Street access, but no physical alley access (the property does not physically abut the alley),
3. Street access, but no practical alley access (the property touches the alley, but the garage faces the street and the yard is separated from the garage by fencing or landscaping), or
4. Both alley access and street access.

The result is that there are only a few alleys where "all street" or "all alley" service will be satisfactory to the residents. Thus, finding a solution that not only meets the needs and preference of all customers while balancing the efficiency and cost for collection is difficult.

Additionally, operating the recycling trucks in some of the alleys is physically impossible or is significantly challenging to do so safely. These physical and safety issues include:

1. Most of the alleys have overhead power and communication lines, which interfere with the ability of the trucks to safely lift the recycling containers.
2. Many alleys are also only slightly wider than the collection trucks and contain encroachments such as fences, landscaping, or temporary obstructions such as parked vehicles.
3. Some blocks have T-shaped alleys, where one segment of the alley continues through to the next street but the other segment dead ends without enough room to turn the truck, thus requiring dangerous backing maneuvers.
4. Some of the alleys are complete dead-ends, resulting in the same issue with backing the large vehicle up.

EXPLORATION OF SOLUTIONS:

With the noted concerns regarding alley access, staff engaged with Aspen to find methods to serve the alley customers under the terms of the collection contract. The contract does contemplate that there will be properties that are required to be picked up in alleys. Aspen's RFP proposal also indicated that most alleys would be able to be served with their equipment.

Following the initial discussions, Aspen has agreed to collect from the alleys in 13 of the 82 blocks where alleys exist. These are primarily alleys that have been more recently reconstructed (and therefore benefit from a better-defined pavement area and fewer encroachments) or those that are newer and, therefore, meet modern alley width standards. Aspen will utilize its ASL trucks to do so.

Since the program start in July, City staff and Aspen have walked or driven each of the alleys, tested driving large trucks through select alleys, and reviewed aerial and street-level photography to identify driveway locations and obstructions. Although Staff and Aspen have worked to find solutions to address the remaining alleys, there remain concerns about whether Aspen can serve all of the remaining alley-adjacent customers from the alleys due to inefficiencies in routing, additional time required due to physical constraints of equipment, and

risk/damage to property that is likely to occur from operating in the alleys.

It is important to note that during these discussions, Aspen has remained engaged in finding solutions that meet the needs of residents. They continue to be an active partner in working through the challenges. Additionally, it has become clear through the discussions that providing a blended service (redundant alley collection and street collection on the same block to match all possible resident preferences) for all 82 affected blocks would be infeasible due to the logistical and cost impacts.

Staff is now presenting four alternatives from which the Council could choose to address alley-adjacent customers. Once an approach is identified, staff will work customer-by-customer to communicate cart location options that are acceptable for pickup. The four alternatives are:

Alternative 1: CONTINUE WITH CURBSIDE SERVICE AS-IS (Street-side only, except for the 13 blocks where Aspen can serve the alleys with ASL trucks)

- No change to any current service locations (all service remains curbside except for 13 alleys that are currently serviced)
- No change to the contracted price with Aspen
- **No improvement for the 27 properties that have expressed concern that their recycling should or must be collected in the alley.**

Alley-adjacent residents would need to find a way to place their cart at the curbside. This could either be in front of their house or they could bring their cart down the alley to the right of way where the alley meets the street. However, there are concerns this approach could continue to be challenging during winter months when the right of way is used for snow storage.

There are likely more than the 27 known properties that have alley concerns. However, by observation over the past two months, many properties that do have alley access are continuing to bring carts to the curbside for service. **This option would provide the most predictable service outcome and consistency from the start of the program as there would be no changes to the location of the service for any property in the program.**

Alternative 2: APPROACH THE ISSUE IN THE SAME MANNER AS ALTERNATIVE 1, BUT IDENTIFY LIMITED CRITERIA TO ALLOW FOR A FULL OPT-OUT OF THE FEE

- No change to any current service locations (all service remains curbside except for 13 alleys that are currently serviced)
- No change to the contracted price with Aspen
- No improvement for the 27 properties that have expressed concern that their recycling should or must be collected in the alley.
- **Staff prepares an amendment to the curbside recycling ordinance that would allow for certain alley-adjacent customers to opt out of the program and paying the mandatory \$7.75 per month recycling fee.**

The opt-out of paying the fee would provide relief for customers who do not have a reasonable way to participate in the program, even through taking the container a short distance to the nearest street frontage. Staff proposes that the only properties that

would be eligible to opt out of the fee would be those that meet the following requirements:

1. The property must abut an alley.
2. The property must not have a driveway access that goes to a street frontage.
3. The property must receive garbage collection (if any) in the alley.
4. The property must have a physical impediment that does not allow access from the alley of the property to the front of the property (e.g., a fence with no gate, landscaping with no pathway, zero lot line building, etc.). The absence of a paved or established path does not meet this criteria (a cart can be moved through a grass side yard).
5. The nearest property line must be more than 60 feet from the curb line of the nearest street frontage, measured along the alley (this is approximately the median distance from the garage door to the curb of a random sample of Ames residential properties).

Staff believes that this evaluation would provide a equitable review for those properties that simply cannot be serviced at the curbside due to limitations in the layout of the property. **It is important to note that the City remains liable to Aspen for the payment of the contracted monthly collection fee for each eligible customer. This amount is \$4.00 per month in the first year of the contract, escalating annually. Therefore, the loss of \$7.75 in revenue plus the payment obligation of \$4.00 to Aspen results in a net cost to the recycling program of \$141 per household per year.**

Staff is not certain how many eligible properties would exercise the right to opt out of the fee. For illustrative purposes, of the approximately 1,000 alley-adjacent customers, roughly half are primarily accessed via the alleys and not the street frontage. Assuming half again of those (250) met the requirements and requested exclusions, staff estimates the net loss to the recycling program to be \$35,250 in the first year.

Alternative 3: CONTINUE WITH CURBSIDE SERVICE AND ADD IN TARGETED ALLEY SERVICE

- 13 alleys that are currently serviced in the alley remain served via the alley
- **An additional 29 alleys convert from curbside to alley service**
- **All other blocks remain curbside only**
- **Cost increase of \$40,383 for each year of the Aspen contract**
- Improvement for 19 of the 27 properties that have expressed concern that their recycling should or must be collected in the alley.

Aspen would use its larger ASL trucks to serve these additional alleys. The majority of these alleys run north-to-south. As such there would not be curbside service on those blocks that have alley service. However, because of the manner in which Aspen's trucks are routed across town, any property fronting on an east-west street would continue to receive service curbside. Corner lots that do not have alley access would be asked to place carts on the east-west street side of their property in order to continue receiving curbside service.

Additionally, there would be at least 15 properties that would be asked to place their carts in a pickup location that is one to two properties away in order to be serviced either curbside or in the alley. This is necessary because there is a small number of lots that front on a north-south street but are in the middle of a block, and do not abut

the alley (see attached presentation for examples). Staff would reach out individually to those properties to aid in identifying locations for curbside service.

There are likely properties in these blocks identified for alley service that are currently satisfied with their curbside service and would not want to switch to alley service. This may result in creating an even larger number of complaints by converting to all alley-service as opposed to the current all-street service! Staff does not have an estimate as to the number of those properties.

Eight properties that have communicated with the City about a lack of alley access would still not have alley access under this alternative. This is primarily due to one of two factors: either 1) the alley is a dead-end or tee that does not allow for the ASL equipment to operate all the way through the alley without a dangerous backing operation, or 2) the property is the only location within that block requiring alley service, whereas all the neighbors in that block have street access.

As in Alternative 2, the Council could create criteria in conjunction with this alternative to exclude some individual properties from the monthly fee for the residential curbside recycling program.

Alternative 3 would require a contract amendment with Aspen for an additional cost of \$0.25 per customer per month. The increased fee applies to all eligible properties (13,461 citywide), resulting in a cost increase of \$40,383 for each year of the contract.

The additional expense can be absorbed into the current \$7.75 per month fee structure and would not require an immediate change of recycling rates charged to residents. Staff believes that rates can remain stable for several years before potentially needing adjustment to maintain adequate fund balance to cover program expenses. This is, however, highly dependent on fuel costs, which are variable with the market during the term of the contract and which are currently high.

Removing some vegetation and other obstructions, and trimming trees is likely necessary for this alternative to work. The majority of this vegetation is located on private property, where trimming is the responsibility of each property owner. Staff would need to work with each property owner on a case-by-case basis, which may delay the start of service in the alleys.

ALTERNATIVE 4: PROVIDE ALLEY-ONLY SERVICE IN ALL BLOCKS WITH ALLEYS

- **All 82 blocks with alleys convert to alley-only service**
- **Cost increase of \$80,766 for each year of the Aspen contract**
- Improvement for all 27 properties that have expressed concern that their recycling should or must be collected in the alley.

Aspen would add rear-load equipment to its service delivery, which would be used only for the purpose of servicing the alleys. Because the contract requires reliable collection, Aspen would need to dedicate a backup rear-load truck to recycling collection. As described earlier, rear-load service is more labor- and cost-intensive than automated side-loader service.

Similar to Alternative 3, the east-west streets would continue to be serviced at the curbside.

Any corner lots would need to place carts along an east-west street. No streetside service would occur on north-south streets.

This alternative would be able to service all 27 of the properties that reached out regarding alley service. This approach, however, would change the service location for at least 400 of the approximately 1,000 properties that are adjacent to alleys. Those properties would need to find a way to move their carts to the alley or to a nearby east-west street in order to be serviced. As with Alternative 3, this may result in creating more problems than it resolves!

Alternative 4 would require a contract amendment with Aspen for an additional cost of \$0.50 per customer per month. The increased fee applies to all eligible properties (13,461 citywide), resulting in a cost increase of \$80,766 for each year of the contract. The additional expense would likely require an adjustment to recycling rates in Year 2 or Year 3 of the program to maintain an adequate fund balance. There would also likely be additional vegetative maintenance required of adjacent property owners, though not as extensive because rear-load trucks are smaller when compared to an ASL truck.

ALTERNATIVES:

1. Direct staff to continue with recycling services as-is.
2. Direct staff to continue with recycling services as-is and to prepare modifications to the recycling program ordinance allowing alley-adjacent customers to opt out of paying the mandatory monthly fee in limited circumstances (estimated loss of up to \$35,250 annually to the recycling program).
3. Approve a change order with Aspen Waste Services of Iowa in the amount of \$40,383 to provide alley service for 29 additional alley-adjacent blocks.
4. Approve a change order with Aspen Waste Services of Iowa in the amount of \$80,766 to provide alley service only for all 82 alley-adjacent blocks.

CITY MANAGER'S RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Providing the curbside recycling service to customers on city blocks that contain alleys has proven to be a significant logistical challenge. There is no consistency from block to block regarding the residential properties that have access to alleys, access to the street frontage, or both.

Serving these customers in each of their preferred locations (alley or street frontage) would result in a substantial number of increased collection truck trips. This, in turn, would 1) increase costs to the overall program in a manner that would necessitate premature customer rate increases and 2) present safety and property protection challenges.

The solutions involving conversion of some or all of the alley-adjacent blocks may address the concerns received to date from several dozen residents. However, staff is concerned that such a conversion would generate a new batch of communications from customers that are satisfied with the current collection approach (streetside) and become dissatisfied with the

alternative (alley collection).

The approach that maximizes the potential customer satisfaction without creating significant risks for the overall program costs or creating a new set of dissatisfied customers is the approach described in Alternative 2. Staff will continue to regularly meet with Aspen to discuss ways in which the recycling service can be effectively and efficiently delivered to residents.

Therefore, it is the recommendation of the City Manager that the City Council adopt Alternative No. 2, as described above.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Recycling_Alley_Update.pptx](#)