

Let's Talk September 21

Topic: Trash

People: Lizabeth Gray; Sam Gallagher; Hannah Fierle; Chris Mitchell, DPW; Matt Landy, Pitt Conduct; Jamilah Ducar, Pitt ECA; Millie; Justin Dandoy, Pitt Conduct; Trisha Margiotti; Bob Charland; Kathy Gallagher; Elena Zaitsoff; DaVonn Brown, City Council; Katie Emmert; Steve Anderson; Phyllis Wechsler; Katie Fitzpatrick, CGR Chair SGB; Mark Oleniacz.

Lizabeth introduced the guest speakers present at the meeting before Q&A began.

Q&A

The Q&A began with a remark that the University of Pittsburgh has some responsibility for their students in the neighborhood—every 9 months, it's the same issues and that trash rules are tough to interpret for students. Private trash collection in Oakland was suggested.

Q: What type of trash-related education do off-campus Pitt students receive from the university?

A: Pitt provides this education through a variety of avenues, such as through town halls, student affairs, and the Pitt Green Team. Additionally, the landlord-tenant agreement through the pittsburgh.gov website is meant to be used and could maybe be more heavily policed if the landlord registry gets off the ground.

Q: Is there or could there be legislation to enforce this landlord-tenant agreement?

A: Not through the environmental department's resources—I can't say what department it is through. As of now, nothing is being done to make sure agreement is in place. Courts will bring this agreement up if landlords take tenants to court, so it is used in that sense, but otherwise not enforced.

The Q&A continued with a series comments regarding recycling day issues in Oakland. Recycling day is every other week, but this has fallen through the cracks and is confusing. People ruin their recyclables by leaving them out because they're confused on pick-up day. It was asked how we can communicate this information in a timely manner to tenants. It needs to be more immediate before people are threatened with eviction or taken to court. It was also asked if Pitt could get involved to have block/area captains to notice issues and educate new residents on information they need.

The conversation then shifted towards the sanctity of the sidewalks for pedestrians. They are consistently crowded and unwalkable, especially during Pitt move-in weeks. It was remarked that the community should address these issues early on so they are solved in a timely manner.

Q: Are there ADA concerns regarding sidewalk blockages?

A: I've been working on reporting blocked sidewalks, and it's a pretty bad situation. I have not heard back from the Department of Mobility and Infrastructure yet.

Q: Are Pitt student tenants eligible for texts from the city reminding them about trash and recycling dates? Can Pitt have students sign up for these reminders?

A: It's actually not a city service, but it could be beneficial to encourage students to use this service. The city wants to better utilize a system like this, acquire software to run it, and scale it up significantly. Perhaps this system could auto-enroll student tenants?

Q: Could Pitt create their own app or reminders?

A: The city has had issues with these sort of one-off solution attempts that people eventually move on from and don't remain maintained. We want something more off the shelf, with a help center perhaps.

Q: But could the university take this on? It could be introduced during orientation week. It would also be similar to the university's existing messaging alert system, and the university has an existing database that they use for text messaging to students.

A: Perhaps we should defer to the city's preferred system? We can make the existing texting service prominently known to students, but the university making this app would ultimately be a waste of time and resources and not ideally efficient due to the existing service that already does what this app would seek to. Besides, it would have to be city-wide anyways because Pitt students live throughout the city.

The conversation then shifted to Pitt meetings with off-campus students. They were passive and poorly attended recently, whereas in past they had panels with lawyers, OPDC reps, and others. Pitt representatives remarked they are workshopping them to work better with the students, as students want a resource fair style thing to make it easier for them to drop in and work around their schedule. A panel is anticipated for this year.

Q: Could there be more student leadership in neighborhoods, like neighborhood RAs of sorts that can help with trash education and responsible hosting early in semesters?

A: Pitt is moving very quickly to launch paid student positions to address neighborhood quality and living-related issues in neighborhoods.

Q: What is the timeline for this, and how many students will be hired?

A: We will be hiring roughly 20 students. Our timeline for this is ASAP. Positions are being posted! We are still tweaking the program design, but will have students hired and the program launched during this fall semester.

Q: Is this program like the existing off-campus ambassador program?

A: Yes, it is similar to that off-campus ambassador model used in the early pandemic to help people get by. However, this new program is shifting to address neighborhood living and quality more broadly.

Q: Will you be bringing in people from OPDC, DPW, environmental services, and other community partners to help with this?

A: We don't want to overwhelm recruits, but there will be training and neighborhood walk-arounds to help recruits get a sense for what the existing issues in their neighborhoods are. There is potential for work with partners though.

Q: Could Bob update us on quality-of-life ticketing?

A: Chris Mitchell and myself have been working throughout the summer to see if there are possibilities to cite residents for trash violations on the first offense rather than going through the current long violation process we know isn't effective and our environmental services workers don't want to go through because it takes them off the truck an exceptional amount of time. The office is looking at a possibility that has been adopted by other cities to have one known violation, here's a ticket, like parking violations. Then you can argue it in court after the fact instead of waiting through three trips through by environmental services workers to end up going to court and paying a fine. Our last update is that the legal department is looking at what definitions we need to have—a little different than past ones to define rubbish. We need to have specific definitions. Community groups and environmental service workers are tired of people after two or three violations going before a judge and not changing their behavior. The hope is that after one small fine behavior will change.

It was noted that it should be clarified that private property is PLI concern, as we want to avoid double citations through different departments.

Q: Regarding trash violations—who receives them? Is it a student or landlord issue? Or does the city? Who is at fault?

A: It depends on what agreement is in place in the lease; that would determine whether tenants or landlords are at fault.

Q: There is a desire and need for weekly recycling! We have a lot to justify a weekly basis. Could the city do this?

A: The city ideally wants to make the move to this eventually, maybe in the next couple of years. However, there are capacity issues and a lot needs to be done to make this switch. Currently, there are half as many recycling trucks as others, and the city would want to include composting, too. We are working with the sustainability office to figure this out. There needs to be a massive hiring spree, but there are roadblocks in the way. Overall, we'd like to be able to do this, but a lot needs to happen to get there.

Q: Is there a policy in place regarding if you have more recycling than what fits in a bin, like after parties

A: We are trying to move away from plastic and are currently accepting bagged recyclables in 35 gallon bags. We believe that investment in sturdy containers pays for itself. Landlords could be offered larger cans if they and tenants understand how to properly use them.

Q: What about 96-gallon containers?

A: Certainly a possibility, but city-issue containers will be serviced always. There are also recycling drop-off places throughout the city where bulk can be brought.

Q: The issue is we're trying to encourage people not to bring cars into Oakland. Is there a possibility for the city to locate Bigbelly stations that are solar operated and have something close for the students to recycle with?

A: I agree; if we can find a location, steps can be taken. Oakland is strapped for space, but if we can we'll put an agreement in place.

Q: Do things always need to be rinsed to be recycled?

A: Ideally, but practically speaking this isn't always possible. Food residue is the main concern, fluids less so.

Q: At orientation, do they ever go over how to be a good neighbor?

A: Regarding freshman orientation, most first years live on campus. We are trying to figure out how to meet the needs of students, such as by getting town halls planned to communicate to students. Many students and staff want to identify how to best serve and meet the needs of the community

A (cont.): From the student side, we're very concerned about trash and the town halls are a great opportunity to educate students about living off-campus.

The conversation then turned to how even kids in the dorms need to know that they need to be good neighbors and treat neighborhoods and residents well. Pitt representatives remarked that the code of conduct applies on and off campus and that off-campus misconduct can be addressed. This is reinforced during welcome week multiple times. Pitt is trying to better address this; they're working on connecting with students to educate them on being a good neighbor one-on-one, and sometimes students embrace this. It was remarked that some community members are hesitant to talk to student neighbors about their trash issues because they often reply that this is to be expected. A community member remarked that they were cited for a mattress outside their house because students were moving out and just dumped it on the sidewalk. When it's in front of someone else's house, it becomes their problem—this is an ongoing issue. Bob Charland noted that the current system in place should require three citations before appearing before a judge, and therefore going forward instances like this should be less prevalent. The citations could have also come from DPW or environmental services.

