

LOCAL LAWS VS GARBAGE

Trash segregation ordinances buried in poor neighborhoods

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[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 12:26 AM April 19, 2017



Garbage collectors work double time as they clear Cebu City's streets of trash left by residents. —JUNJIE MENDOZA/CEBU DAILY NEWS

(Second of three parts)

CEBU CITY—Shane is frustrated—and angry.

Garbage was piling up and the house was already getting smelly, but hauling trucks were nowhere in sight. So the 33-year-old mother of two young boys decided to dump the trash by the road instead.

“Every day, we accumulate garbage, especially when you have children in the house. Yet our garbage collectors don’t come here as scheduled,” Shane said.

She declined to give her complete name for fear of reprisal from neighbors if they find out she was littering the street.

She was not the only who took that recourse.

In another village, Guadalupe, several residents no longer wait for the dump trucks to arrive. Sometimes, the trucks came in the afternoon instead of morning as scheduled.

No neighborhood discipline

“Our neighbors don’t have discipline. They throw their garbage anywhere,” Tita Cabradilla said. “Sometimes, they throw their trash inside the gate of Banawa Elementary School.”

Garbage collection has always been a problem in this premier city of more than 700,000 people.

Close to 600 tons of trash are produced every day, according to Roberto Cabarrubias, head of the city’s Department of Public Services (DPS).

The volume skyrockets during special events, such as the Sinulog Festival celebration, Christmas season, All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day.

Three years ago, only 260-500 tons were recorded daily, said Councilor Joel Garganera, chair of the city’s environment committee. “If we are not going to do anything about this, maybe in 20 years time, we will all be standing on (a heap of) garbage,” he said.

Though there are enough local laws on waste management, their implementation is problematic, Garganera said.

Segregating at the source

For example, Ordinance No. 2031, which was approved in 2004 and mandates waste segregation at the source, has not been enforced.

Garbage collectors are supposed to turn down wastes not segregated as either biodegradable or compostable, nonbiodegradable, reusable or recyclable, hazardous or special, or bulky.

Efforts to enforce the law by simplifying trash types to only biodegradable and nonbiodegradable, and setting collection schedules for each type have not been successful.

Most residents don’t segregate, forcing collectors to take their garbage lest they bear the brunt of their anger and clean up the street litter.

Garganera said the people could be forced to segregate if only penalties were strictly enforced. Under Ordinance No. 2031, violators pay a fine of P1,000 to P5,000 or face imprisonment of one to six months.

A former barangay chair of Tinago, Garganera said barangay environmental officers (BEOs) used to enforce the ordinance.

Gated communities

“The BEOs were very effective. Even my own driver was put to jail for violating the ordinance. I did not interfere. I don’t know what happened to them. There are some BEOs being appointed now but they don’t know where to go,” he said.

“You can have the best ordinance,” he said, “but enforcement is another question.”

In subdivisions, villages and other gated communities, residents are noticeably more responsible with their garbage disposal than those in other areas, according to John Paul Gelasque, assistant head of the city's DPS.

"There is a big difference. They are more disciplined (in waste segregation) compared to those in the squatters' area. That's based on our experience. They would segregate and they would observe our policies in garbage collection," Gelasque said.

He attributed the behavior to the higher educational level of people living in gated communities, which, he said, had made them more understanding and patient when it came to waste segregation.

Moreover, homeowners' associations oversee compliance with waste segregation. "There should always be constant monitoring," Gelasque said.

While the DPS and the barangays constantly conduct information dissemination and campaigns among residents on segregation and garbage collection, these were not religiously practiced and followed by most residents in poor communities, he added.

Another city law bans business establishments from using plastic every Saturday.

Ordinance No. 2343, or the "No Plastic Saturday Ordinance of Cebu City," was authored by then Councilor Nida Cabrera. The law was passed in 2012 after plastic bags were identified as the main cause of clogging of drainage lines and waterways, which resulted in floods.

It is not fully implemented in the city, however.

Cabrera, now the environmental consultant of Mayor Tomas Osmeña, agreed that the increasing garbage volume was a serious concern. Aside from the poor implementation of waste reduction policies, other factors contribute to the problem, she said.

One is the city's growing population as the economic boom has attracted people looking for work from other provinces. Another is consumers' dependency on plastic packaging and their tendency to buy in small packages.

"Almost all products now are wrapped in plastic. People are also now patronizing small-scale buying instead of bulk buying. So the amount of garbage from all these smaller packagings have also contributed in the increase of our garbage volume," Cabrera said.

But Cabrera believes that the problem could be addressed by reducing wastes at source.

An ordinance is now being crafted, she said, to require subdivisions and condominiums to establish their own materials recovery facilities (MRFs)—specialized plants that receive, separate and prepare recyclable materials. It is expected to be submitted to the city council next month.

With an MRF, glass bottles, plastics, cartons and papers can be separated and sold to junk shops or plants and establishments for recycling. "MRFs will also have composting facilities so that what really is left are residual wastes, which will then be collected by the city or the barangay," she said.

Cabrera said the city would talk to owners of business establishments with an average daily garbage volume of 2 tons and recommend that they also set up their own MRFs.

Scavengers could be employed to segregate wastes at the MRFs of subdivisions and condominiums.

If the proposed ordinance will be approved by the city council, Cabrera said, “we envision that our garbage generation will be reduced by 30 percent.”