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the freedom of speech, or of the press ..."*

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Green-conscious Växjö as our Sister City? Try Amsterdam and its like-minded scofflaws

Quick quiz: What do recycling in Duluth and smoking pot in Amsterdam have in common? Before you answer, let me clear up a common misconception about the latter.

Technically, the sale of marijuana is illegal in Amsterdam — even in its infamous coffee houses. The reason you can stroll in and roll a joint is because the city doesn't enforce the law. The resulting hordes of tourists generate much more revenue than would enforcement.

In Duluth, the rules governing

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LOCAL VIEW

ment.

In Duluth, the rules governing recycling and garbage removal are laid out by the Western Lake Superior Sanitary District's Solid Waste Disposal Ordinance. It requires all residents to separate recyclables from their trash. Technically speaking, responsibility for enforcing this requirement rests with the trash haulers.

A recent random sampling of local containers (yes, I went crawling through people's garbage) suggested to me that many residents routinely flout this requirement. Cue the waste haulers to come in and crack the whip, right?

On second thought, don't. Recently, I interviewed some local waste haulers about how they enforce the WLSSD ordinance. Turns out, they have no authority to levy fines on scofflaws. Instead, many of them rely on "education" — mostly in the form of stickers and handouts — rather than punitive measures to coax customers into compliance. While one conscientious hauler explained that its drivers won't accept improperly sorted recycling materials, the company does not refuse to take garbage bins contaminated with recyclables.

Who can blame them? Running a profitable business usually requires at least two things: Keeping customers happy and keeping costs low. Both work at cross purposes with effective enforcement tactics.

Take customer satisfaction: Most business owners will tell you that the road to repeat business isn't paved with threatening letters and repeated refusals to provide service (especially if that entails leaving fetid trash to mold for an extra week).

Low costs — often a function of efficiency — are another likely casualty of true enforcement. How much longer would each pick-up route take if drivers spent five minutes at each house inspecting both the garbage and recycling bins for violations?

By putting the haulers in charge of enforcement, we basically ask them to work against their own interests. (For other examples of the efficacy of placing regulatory enforcement in the hands of market participants, please see global warming, Enron and the subprime mortgage crisis.)

To hold haulers accountable for this misplaced responsibility, WLSSD can fine them when it finds recyclable materials in the trash that haulers dump at the dis-

trict's facility. Given the choice between accepting such fines as a cost of doing business (and adjusting rates accordingly) or alienating customers by playing hardball, would it surprise you if the haulers chose the former? Again, could you blame them?

Such is the state of recycling enforcement in Duluth: no fines and no real consequences for scofflaws. Does this sound more like Växjö, described in the July 28 News Tribune as a "model across Europe for energy conservation, sustainability and environmental protection," or Amsterdam, which provides a different kind of, er, model?

Unlike Amsterdam, Duluth loses revenue by eschewing enforcement — a fact that should interest a town that recently considered extorting \$500 from residents whose houses were on fire. Given the soaring market value of some recyclable materials, now just may be the time to start taking enforcement seriously.

Doing so doesn't have to be difficult or expensive. Given the current enforcement vacuum, the specter of even one random inspector writing tickets for violations likely would compel some recycling deadbeats to think twice. Make that fine \$500 and you'd be getting somewhere.

How to pay for this? Work out a deal with WLSSD to capture the recyclable materials that end up in the garbage. WLSSD spokeswoman Karen Anderson told me that about \$1 million worth of aluminum alone passed through the facility last year. Can a city with a \$5 million budget deficit afford to pass on a cut of that action? You could even make scofflaws spend a day pulling recyclables from the trash. I did it for a whole summer while in college; it's not fun.

If we are going to commit ourselves to the dubious notion that people always will act in their economic self-interest, then we need to employ both carrots (the lower trash bills that can result from recycling) and sticks (penalties for scofflaws) to make the system work. Until then, plastic bottles and pop cans in Duluth garbage bins will remain as ubiquitous as joints in Amsterdam coffee houses.

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