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July 25, 2022 07:30 AM | UPDATED 19 MINUTES AGO

Here's how filthy New York City is looking to clean up its act

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Buck Ennis

A worker throws recycled trash on the corner of Maiden Lane and Pearl Street in the Financial District.

After two years of budget cuts to sanitation programs, City Hall has committed \$40 million to clear the streets of trash

If you think the city has gotten dirtier in the past year, you're not alone.

A May survey of 8,500 New Yorkers conducted by city Comptroller Brad Lander's office found that 57% feel their neighborhood is dirtier than it was a year ago. The top complaints included overflowing litter baskets (24%), sidewalks obstructed by trash (19%), **rats** (17%), missed trash collections (15%), illegal dumping (15%) and derelict vehicles (10%).

And a review of 311 calls by the New York Post found that complaints about odor had increased by 54% in the first six months of the year compared to the first six months of 2021. In total, more than 5,700 odor complaints were placed between January and June.

"It only smells like marijuana, piss and beer around here," said Tommy Greco, owner of K Rico South American Steakhouse in Hell's Kitchen. "It's like a frat party everywhere."

The increased grime can be partially blamed on the fact that the public and private sanitation industries are struggling due to pandemic-era budget cuts of about \$200 million. Perhaps most distressingly, rat sightings **were up 54%** in 2021 compared to 2020, according to a *Crain's* data analysis.

"It's been two or three really difficult years with budget cuts, lower revenues than previous years and protests when people were out in droves," said Adam Ganser, executive director of New Yorkers for Parks, an advocacy group.

Mayor Eric Adams readily agreed with these sentiments during a July 10 press conference at which he announced a budget agreement that prioritized millions of dollars in new and restored funding for trash collection programs.

"New Yorkers, we heard you, and we listened: The streets are too darn dirty," Adams said. "No one wants dirty streets, to live across from an unkempt lot or garbage and pests. And it's just unpleasant to live [like that]."

Adams and the City Council have put \$20.4 million toward restored funding for cleaning and mitigation services. But previous cuts, and the pressures of the pandemic years on trash collection, will make it hard for the city to climb out of the mess.

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NYC cut sanitation funding after Covid hit

Sanitation funding was reduced during the de Blasio's administration's austerity budgets of the first two pandemic summers. The sanitation budget reached \$2.1 billion in the fiscal year that began in July 2020 but has since dropped steadily to around \$1.9 billion for the upcoming fiscal year.

"The budget for one of those functions, cleaning, was completely decimated through cuts, and anyone who looked outside could see the difference immediately," said Department of Sanitation Commissioner Jessica Tisch during a June 27 press conference. "I am a data-driven person, and the numbers tell a shocking story."

The two fiscal years between 2019 and 2021 saw a funding decline across multiple program areas: Collection and street cleaning in each of the five boroughs fell by an average of \$8 million, according to a 2022 budget function analysis. General waste disposal funding declined by \$3 million, and landfill waste disposal funding declined by \$11 million. Waste prevention, reuse and recycling funding dropped by \$19 million in that same two-year period.

"They cut a lot of programs because of Covid, but sanitation was one of the bigger ones they cut," said Carlos Castell-Croke, associate for city programs at the New York League of Conservation Voters.

The funding reductions took a toll on services.

The Department of Sanitation's agency scorecard showed that the number of dirty

sidewalk violations issued in the first four months of fiscal 2022, which began in July 2021, increased by nearly 3,000 compared to the same period the previous fiscal year. Missed refuse collections increased from 0.1% in 2019 to 0.8% in 2021; missed recycling collections increased from 0.1% to 0.7% in that same period.

“I think things have gotten worse,” Castell-Croke said. “They’ve reduced the amount of litter basket pickups, and I know for a fact, in terms of parks, last year was one of the dirtiest years on record because of the funding.”

Department of Parks and Recreation funding dropped by \$41 million between the summer of 2020 and the summer of 2021.

Ganser noted that the City Cleanup Corps, a pandemic-era project funded by federal dollars, was not included in the new budget agreement. He said those workers within the Parks Department will be transitioned to seasonal employee positions and stay on the job through September, when those temporary positions end for good.

“That’s a substantial number of people. It averaged 1,800 on the Parks [Department] side,” he said. “They bridged the gap between a terrible budget season and one that’s improving.”



Buck Ennis

Trash piles up on the corner of Pearl Street and Maiden Lane.

Trash-hauling firms face labor shortage, rising fuel costs

When Cory Epstein walks around New York City, he notices that sanitation workers must often maneuver around cars, sometimes needing to haul large bags of trash around rows of vehicles.

During these pickups, the massive sanitation trucks sometimes block traffic but are often stopped from completing efficient pickups by the lack of curbside space, he said.

Epstein spends a lot of time on the street. He's the communications director for Transportation Alternatives, an advocacy organization that has fought for [traffic safety and the construction of bike lanes](#) for more than 50 years. Epstein believes the lack of dedicated space on New York streets for sanitation workers to load and unload trash has created a flawed collection process that is both needlessly expensive and wildly inefficient.

“The way trash builds up on the street, it’s not something you see in [leading cities around the globe](#),” Epstein said. “There are many cars that are parked in our city that barely move where trash accumulates.”

He argues that the city has lacked both the vision and the willpower to improve trash collection.

“You don’t need fancy new technology underground to solve our trash problems. You need to use what’s right in front of us, which is the curb,” he said. “There needs to be a new approach to sanitation and a new approach to trash pickup, and that starts on the curb.”

It’s not just public sanitation operations that have been hurt by budget cuts in a shaky economy. The private carting companies tasked with picking up trash from the city’s 200,000 commercial businesses are also feeling pinched.

“They’ve faced some labor shortages and have seen their fuel prices go up dramatically, and the transfer station dump fees have gone up,” said David Biderman, executive director of the Solid Waste Association of North America. “Their costs have increased rather significantly, particularly over the past year.”

The Commercial Waste Zone Law approved by the city in 2019 is expected to overhaul the entire makeup of New York’s commercial waste industry. It is slated to take effect next year and calls for the breakup of the city into 20 zones to be serviced by no more than three firms per zone.

A June 6 letter from the National Waste and Recycling Association to Tisch, the Sanitation commissioner, questioned the assumptions made by the city that the Commercial Waste Zone Law will improve pickup service.

“Overall, [the Department of Sanitation’s] continued suggestion that the [Commercial Waste Zone] system will deliver high-quality services at low cost is fundamentally contradictory and sends an inaccurate message to the marketplace,” the letter read.

The uncertainty and lack of coordination is creating headaches for small-business owners. Almost all commercial businesses are serviced by private carters, while residential apartments, which are often above many businesses, are serviced by the Sanitation Department.

Small businesses grapple with customer complaints

Greco said tourists have visited his Manhattan restaurant for the first time since the pandemic began and have complained about **mounds of trash** outside his Hell's Kitchen establishment and an **increased homeless population** in the neighborhood.

"They say, 'It's just dirty,'" Greco said. "I don't see street sweepers like I used to. Even though we used to pick apart [Mayor Michael] Bloomberg as 'a nanny state,' the city was as safe and clean as could be."

Wellington Chen, executive director of the Chinatown Partnership, said that although increased amounts of trash are a sign that more customers and tourists are returning to central business districts, he also cautioned that there aren't enough hands on deck to pick up the refuse.

Chen said the biggest issue in Chinatown today is graffiti on buildings and that business owners in neighboring Little Italy are plagued by illegal dumping, the act of leaving trash or debris on public or private property.

"It takes us back to Charles Dickens' days," Chen said. "He was so appalled by New York, and his experience with New York was so unpleasant that he said, 'We should get down on all fours and the pigs will be left wondering why we're the masters.'"

Mayor, City Council boost sanitation funding

Adams and a progressive City Council made **new funding for sanitation and trash pickup** a key component of their **budget agreement** for the fiscal year that begins next month.

The city included \$22 million for twice-daily litter basket service, which will ensure trash cans will be emptied 50,000 more times per week citywide and contribute less spillover to sidewalks. The Adams administration has also developed a rat-proof litter basket that will replace the current mesh design.

An additional \$7.5 million will be spent on precision cleaning initiatives that will target persistent littering and illegal dumping, and \$4.5 million will be spent to refund the Sanitation Department lot-cleaning unit, a pre-pandemic program that targeted illegal trash dumping in vacant lots. Nearly \$5 million will go exclusively toward rat mitigation.

In total, the administration has committed \$40.6 million in new funding for sanitation services.

In addition, alternate side of the street parking, which the city calls “the strongest tool in the street cleaning arsenal,” returned July 5, allowing street sweepers to resume their routes. In February the city announced it would spend \$11 million to restore alternate-side parking, which had been partially suspended during the pandemic, and establish sweeping operations on protected bike lanes.

During the June 27 press conference with Tisch to announce these new initiatives, Adams praised sanitation workers and noted the importance of targeted investments focused on removing trash and penalizing illegal dumping.

“This is not a sexy project, but it is a clear project that impacts the quality of life for New Yorkers,” the mayor said. “We know clean streets are vital to the vibrant neighborhoods and to the city’s economic recovery. They go hand in hand.”

Inline Play

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