

Is Your City Rifling Through Your Garbage?

August 7, 2015 – For many years now, we’ve been warning our readers to shred their documents before throwing them away. After all, you never know who may decide to go through your trash to steal your identity. What you probably don’t know is that your city may also be going through your garbage. No, they are not trying to steal your identity. These city programs are designed to enforce recycling laws and, in the process, raise revenue by ticketing offenders.

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In Seattle, the Garbage Gestapo is alive and well. Trash collectors there are under orders from the city to rifle through trash and to determine if residents are throwing out food, which by law must be composted rather than discarded. These trash collectors serve as judge, jury and executioner in their determinations. They have the power to ticket anyone whose trash in their sole judgment contains more than 10% recyclable material. It probably won’t come as any great surprise to you that the city is also being sued as a result of this law.

Seattle is far from the only place looking at the trash that is collected. Several cities in Wisconsin now tag trash cans with RFID (radio frequency identification) chips. When garbage is collected, the trucks picking it up actually film the trash as it is dumped and then match the film with the RFID tag. Anyone not following the city recycling laws can be identified and fined.

And other cities across the country are using less sophisticated forms of monitoring. Many of them use RFID chips simply to track how often residents actually place their recycle bin on the street for collection. If the city determines that a particular resident almost never uses their recycle bin, that can be enough for the city to dispatch someone to inspect their trash, and possibly a fine.

What’s a privacy conscious person to do?

If you don't like the idea that your city may be inspecting your trash, there may be some things you can do to protect yourself. First of all, make sure that when you throw out your regular garbage, it is properly bagged. That means making sure that the bag is tied shut. This will help prevent inspection by video camera and make it more difficult for anyone who wants to manually inspect your trash.

Second, make sure that what you throw in your recycle bin is actually recyclable. If you are unsure, most cities publish this type of information on their web sites.

As for Seattle's Garbage Gestapo, there is a pretty good chance that the city will be forced to change the way they inspect. Courts have repeatedly held that for police to go through your garbage, they need a warrant. Since Seattle has seen fit to bestow police powers on their garbage collectors, there is a very good chance the court will make the same requirement of them.

by Jim Malmberg

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