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**Government of the District of Columbia**



**DC Department of Public Works**

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Testimony of  
**Christopher J. Shorter**  
Director

**Public Oversight Roundtable on Leaf Collection**

Committee on Transportation and the Environment

*Councilmember Mary M. Cheh, Chairperson*

John A. Wilson Building  
Room 412  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20004  
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Good morning, Chairperson Cheh and members and staff of the Committee on Transportation and the Environment. I am Christopher Shorter, Director of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works (DPW). I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to testify on the District's 2017/2018 leaf collection program.

I would like to start by thanking the Mayor and City Administrator for their leadership and dedication to finding ways to continually improve city services that meet and exceed our residents' expectations.

My testimony today is organized into four parts. I will begin with an overview of our leaf collection operations, followed by a look at the enhancements DPW has made to the program over the last several years, the challenges we faced this season, and, finally, what improvements we are examining for the 2018/2019 season.

### **Overview of Leaf Collection Operations**

DPW is responsible for the collection and disposal of leaves across the District. The Street and Alley Cleaning Division (SACD) provides this vital city service throughout the District in all eight wards. This year, our official leaf collection period started on November 6, 2017, and ended on January 12, 2018. However, we extended leaf collections over the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend and will continue to collect leaves as needed through February 2, 2018, with a primary focus on holiday tree collections during this period. This includes responding to residents who contact DPW directly or call 311.

In organizing our leaf collection schedule this season, each ward was divided into three to five collection areas, or zones, and assigned two one-week collection cycles. The first pass is used to vacuum loose leaves and clear bags from tree boxes, take care of hazardous conditions, such as leaves blocking parking and travel lanes, and to collect leaves clogging storm drains. The second pass, in addition to collecting leaves that fell after the first pass, includes a more thorough cleaning of the streets using mechanical street sweepers. Our crews begin at the top of each zone and work their way down, with some crews working on the right side of streets and others working on the left.

This leaf season, we hired 210 temporary personnel. Prior to the official start of leaf season in early November, the new temporary hires' primary activities consisted of intensive classroom and field training. Classroom training included: (1) DPW and leaf season program orientation; (2) safety, drug, and alcohol use policy; (3) defensive driving concepts; and (4) snow program orientation as a proactive measure should a snow event coincide with leaf season. For those who may not be familiar, our leaf collection teams also work as part of the DC Snow Team. Field training included use of leaf removal equipment, such as the leaf vacuum hose, backpack blowers, and other equipment used during the season.

A typical leaf collection crew consists of five to seven personnel, including a driver, vacuum operator, rake team, sweep team, and leaf blower. The number of employees assigned to each ward depends on the ward's size and the amount of leaves that have historically been collected. Ward 3, for example, had 77 crew members assigned to it—the highest number of any ward.

We began this season with 51 leaf vacuum vehicles, 48 six-wheel dump trucks, and three ten-wheel dump trucks, which were all serviced and ready to go on the first day of collections.

Based on current totals, DPW collected an estimated 7,508 tons of leaves this season, which will be turned into compost and made available at no cost to District residents at the Fort Totten Transfer Station. Composting leaves plays an important role in helping the District meet its waste diversion goals and promotes sustainable urban agricultural practices.

### **Leaf Collection Program Improvements Over the Last Three Seasons**

Each year, after leaf collection operations have concluded, DPW examines what went well and what can be improved. Over the last several years, this has led to several new practices that have proven beneficial.

This season, for the third year in a row, DPW provided leaf collections in two one-week cycles per zone. Prior to this change, residents were given a much larger window of 13 days for collection. Our aim in shortening the pass window was to reduce the amount of time residents must wait for collection and the likelihood of leaves obstructing storm drains, being re-scattered in the neighborhood and ending up as a layer in winter precipitation.

In working toward our city's Zero Waste Goals, this year DPW launched a Resident Leaf Drop-Off at the District's Fort Totten and Benning Road Transfer Stations. This allowed proactive residents to bring their leaves to be composted at times other than their collection dates. In addition, DPW piloted a new program for private contractors that allowed free leaf drop-off at our transfer stations.

Additional technological improvements were also made this year, such as updates to the Leaf Collector App and automatic vehicle location (AVL) tracking system. Starting last year, we enhanced our website so that residents could type in their address to find out when their leaves were scheduled to be collected, if collections on their block had already occurred, and to see before and after photos of streets in their area.<sup>1</sup> These and other technological improvements have enhanced our quality assurance and quality control performance metrics.

To minimize confusion and help residents understand when their collections would occur, this past fall we embarked on a public outreach campaign for the leaf collection season. The multi-media campaign included a redesigned brochure with easy to understand maps mailed to all households serviced by DPW and advertisements placed in *The Washington Post*, *Washington Informer*, Capital Community News publications, and on Metro buses and Clear Channel bus shelters. After the first pass had been made in most neighborhoods, residents received a doorknocker with additional information to remind them when their second pass would occur. Our campaign also focused on community engagement and included multiple emails and pre-season conference calls with ANC commissioners, a video public service announcement, and participation in numerous community meetings to educate the public about our leaf collection program. All of this information was continuously highlighted on social media and promoted at a kickoff press conference held on November 3.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://leaf.dcgis.dc.gov/>

## Challenges Faced This Season

While improvements were made this year, there is no doubt that some areas of the city experienced significant delays. Let me assure you that nobody is more frustrated by this than I am, and that nobody is more motivated to improve our operations for next season. After a preliminary review, we have identified some of the major factors responsible for the delays.

First and foremost was the weather. As *The Washington Post* recently reported, our city has experienced its lowest temperatures in late December and early January since 1918.<sup>2</sup> As a reminder, during the entire 2016/2017 winter season the DC Snow Team deployed 11 times. By contrast, the snow team has already deployed for nine separate winter weather events, and the season is still underway. Because our personnel and equipment are used for leaf and snow operations, whenever there is a snow event deployment, our leaf collection program is essentially put on pause because these crews are the backbone of the snow team. Once the decision to deploy has been made, trucks working on leaf collections are brought in so that the leaf equipment can be removed and the snow equipment, such as plows and salt spreaders, can be added. Once the deployment has ended, each of these trucks must be washed and reequipped. This whole process, depending on the length of the deployment, usually takes about two days. With the recent record-setting cold weather, however, this process often took longer.

I should also note that the District has adopted a more aggressive posture when preparing for and responding to winter weather events, with the goal of ensuring that our streets are safe and open as quickly as possible. While I view this as a positive change that has allowed for smoother AM and PM commutes during winter storms, it has necessitated the diversion of more personnel and equipment from our leaf collection operations more often and for longer periods of time.

In addition to the weather, another major challenge for this season has been our aging fleet. As mentioned previously, we began the season with 51 leaf vacuums. Four of the vacuums went down early in the season and were deemed beyond reasonable repair, which left us with 47. Of these, 43 came into our fleet shop at least once for a total of 119 repairs throughout the season. Inevitably, the downtime required for these repairs caused delays.

I should also note that one persistent issue our crews noticed is private landscapers blowing leaves into the street after our collection crews have serviced a street, causing neighbors to believe that we skipped them.

While there were delays, I do want to take this opportunity to thank the men and women who worked this leaf season. To make up for lost time, our crews worked tirelessly, including weekends, holidays, and even Christmas Day. I have personally received dozens of appreciative notes and emails from many residents, and our teams and managers have received many more.

I should also note that in comparison with other regional cities, the District's leaf collection program is far more comprehensive. In Baltimore, residents are asked to bag their own leaves, which are then collected with their trash. The same is true in Richmond, although residents have the added option of scheduling a vacuum leaf collection for a fee of \$30. Philadelphia residents

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2018/01/09/the-cold-snap-the-d-c-area-just-went-through-was-one-for-the-ages/?utm\\_term=.89f9fea85795](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2018/01/09/the-cold-snap-the-d-c-area-just-went-through-was-one-for-the-ages/?utm_term=.89f9fea85795)

are also asked to bag their own leaves. The city does sweep and vacuum some wooded areas, but these areas are only cleaned once, compared with the two passes we provide citywide.

### **Improvements for Next Season**

While I am appreciative of the work our leaf crews have performed, we continuously seek ways to improve our processes, especially when it comes to our collection schedule.

#### ***Leaf Collection Season Schedule Changes***

The first change we will examine is the leaf season start and end dates. The first freeze of the season was not until November 11, a date that trend lines show is coming later and later.<sup>3</sup> With the temperatures staying warmer longer, leaves have been falling later in the season, which has meant that our crews have little to clear during their first pass in some neighborhoods. As a result, residents in these areas often believe they have been skipped as the leaves begin to fall and pile up in higher volumes. We are exploring whether to begin collection later and how we can strategically schedule catchup days throughout the season's collection schedule to account for delays due to inclement weather events. This would allow us to program makeup periods throughout the season and reduce the potential of extended and/or extreme delays.

#### ***Leaf Collection Outreach and Communications***

During our leaf collection season after action review, we will also explore opportunities for additional community engagement, outreach, and methods of providing real-time information on where our crews are in the collection cycle. While we significantly enhanced our outreach efforts leading up to leaf collection this season and began sharing ward-by-ward schedule updates in December, next year we will work to update residents about delays as soon as they happen, even if we are only behind by a day or two.

We will also explore using a 'Track your Vacs' application similar to the District's snow program to give residents real time information on where our crews are in the schedule based on the automated vehicle locator (AVL) system. We will also establish and properly staff a leaf collection hotline within the DPW Clearinghouse for residents to call and speak with a live person who is knowledgeable of the service schedule and can get information and service requests directly to our program operators. We will also better utilize and better leverage neighborhood listservs and social media from the start to the end of the collection schedule. We will work with the Office of Unified Communications to better leverage 311 service requests and better anticipate hotspots or heavier call volume areas around the city.

#### ***Leaf Collection Technology Improvements***

DPW will also pursue some technology enhancements during the off season, including the possibility of equipping some of our leaf trucks with a live dashboard camera that would allow residents to see our crews hard at work in their neighborhood and view their progress.

#### ***Leaf Collection Program Management and Oversight***

We will also examine the overall management of the program during the off season, including reviewing how zones are supervised, how personnel and equipment will be assigned, and how

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2017/11/08/the-falls-first-freeze-is-coming-saturday-and-for-most-of-the-d-c-area-its-historically-late/?utm\\_term=.413531d693ce](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/capital-weather-gang/wp/2017/11/08/the-falls-first-freeze-is-coming-saturday-and-for-most-of-the-d-c-area-its-historically-late/?utm_term=.413531d693ce)

quality assurance and quality control is conducted. The goal will be to make changes that result in (1) front-line managers and supervisors having more control over their assigned resources by ward; (2) better accountability for the performance of individual leaf collection teams by ward; (3) improved documentation and monitoring of team progress throughout the day and collection week; and (4) enhanced quality control and oversight. This, along with periodic route checks by agency administrators and continued use of the Leaf Collector application, will ensure the work we are doing is verified and accurately reported.

### ***Leaf Collection Equipment***

We are working with the Office of the City Administrator on how best to address the equipment repairs and purchases identified earlier in my testimony. We look forward to working with Council over the coming months on this and other items once the final budget is proposed.

These are some of the preliminary improvement options we will be exploring. We are happy to share any additional improvements the agency identifies following a thorough after-action analysis.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide the Committee with my testimony. I am happy to respond to any questions you might have.