



## **Environmental Best Practices – A Municipal Case Study**

### **Adoption of a Requirement to Bag Leaves for Collection**

**Nina Orville**

---

#### **The Issue**

Many municipalities provide property owners with sanitation services that include pick up and disposal of autumn leaves. Some municipalities collect leaves from curbside piles while others require leaves to be placed in compostable bags for pick-up. Collecting leaves from curbside piles increases municipal costs, presents safety concerns and has a negative impact on water quality. Specifically, municipal costs are increased through the need for specialized sanitation equipment (often vacuum trucks), and increased personnel time (often with over-time compensation). Safety concerns arise from leaf piles blocking sidewalks and impinging on roadways as well as increased flooding from blocked storm drains. Environmental concerns include leaching of phosphorus and nitrogen from leaf piles into waterways.

Requiring that leaves be either put in compostable paper bags or in containers that can be emptied into sanitation trucks reduces many of these concerns. It allows regular sanitation trucks to be deployed for leaf collection, speeds the collection process (reducing labor costs), and allows better management of leaves once collected, reducing both leaching of nutrients and safety hazards resulting from leaf piles. However, despite these benefits, municipalities that provide collection of piled leaves have typically viewed changing their policies to require bagging or containerizing of leaves as politically difficult. Examining the experience of the Town of Greenburgh, New York, a municipality that has recently made this shift may be of value to the others considering this issue<sup>1</sup>.

#### **The Town of Greenburgh**

Located in the heart of Westchester County, New York, the Town of Greenburgh is comprised of six villages and Unincorporated Greenburgh and has a population of 88,400 (2010 US Census). Greenburgh is known for its strong history of environmental leadership. The municipality requires Energy Star standards for new home construction, has led public education efforts regarding energy efficiency and environmental conservation, and its Commissioner of Planning served as co-chair of the recently completed Mid-Hudson Regional Sustainability Plan. The Town's environmental outreach has been supported by the Greenburgh Nature Center ("GNC"), a non-profit nature preserve located on Town property that hosts over 70,000 visitors per year.

---

<sup>1</sup> This case study was created as part of a project funded by Westchester Community Foundation with matching funds from the Local Sustainability Matching Fund, a project of the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.

Like all local governments operating within the constraints of New York State's 2% tax cap, the Town has experienced significant budgetary pressures. These pressures have resulted in a strong focus on cost containment throughout municipal operations, including within the Department of Public Works. Discretionary spending, such as overtime dedicated to leaf collection services, was eliminated from the budget and funding for temporary personnel was removed.

"Without the change to bagging of leaves, in addition to the encouragement of residents to mulch leaves, the Town would not be able to collect leaves in following the traditional methods prior to the winter storms. Budget constraints have precluded the Town from expanding the department to meet needs." **Victor Carosi,**  
**Commissioner of Public Works**

The Highway Department, part of the Department of Public Works, collects fall leaves for residential property owners in Unincorporated Greenburgh. The Highway Department is staffed by 34 personnel and was augmented until 2012 by overtime work and part-time help from the Sanitation Department during the leaf collection season. The Sanitation Department, also part of the Department of Public Works, collects solid waste, recycling (paper and commingled), and other materials for the property owners in Unincorporated Greenburgh and is staffed by 47 personnel.

Prior to the change in leaf collection policy, the Town utilized up to five front end loaders with large "claw" attachments to collect and load leaf piles into waiting dump trucks and containers. At times, over 15 trucks, several more garbage trucks, and three roll-off container trucks were used to haul the leaves to the Town waste transfer station. This further grew to include an additional 15 garbage trucks and additional workers from the Sanitation Department working on an overtime basis during the peak collection periods of late November into December. During 2010 and 2011, overtime payments for Highway and Sanitation Department workers during leaf season totaled \$126,250 and \$124,000 respectively. Additional costs included overtime for the mechanics who also reported to work, repairs to the heavy equipment and vehicle fuel.

### **The Process**

Prior to the change in leaf collection policy, residents would begin piling leaves curbside as leaves began to fall in October and leaf collection by the Highway Department would not be completed until late December or January – typically after snow had fallen. This late finish to leaf collection compounded the challenges of both leaf collection and snow removal. Damaging storms in recent years had further complicated the process by requiring significant removal of downed trees and branches during leaf collection season, further delaying street clearing.

In October 2011, the Town of Greenburgh Town Council heard a presentation regarding the myriad benefits of mulch mowing of leaves from GNC staff. The Village of Irvington (one of the villages located within Greenburgh) had developed a campaign to encourage on-site leaf mulching called "Love 'Em and Leave 'Em," which the GNC was actively promoting (see [www.leleny.org](http://www.leleny.org)). The opportunity to reduce costs associated with leaf collection, while taking steps to improve environmental performance through

mulch mowing, was very compelling to Greenburgh Town Supervisor Paul Feiner, other elected officials and key department staff.

In December 2011 Supervisor Feiner requested information regarding leaf collection policies from the mayors of the villages within the Town of Greenburgh. The mayors who responded all indicated that their municipalities require leaves to be bagged or containerized for pick-up and Supervisor Feiner shared these responses with residents of the Town as well as soliciting feedback from residents. Though the possibility of eliminating leaf collection was briefly considered, a proposal to require bagging or containerizing of leaves was determined to be the most appropriate goal. This approach promised significant cost savings and environmental and safety benefits without resulting in a significant change in services to residents.

A public hearing was scheduled in April 2012 to discuss a proposed change to local law to require leaves be bagged for pick-up. This public hearing was widely publicized by the Town and the rationale for the proposed change was again articulated. Later that month, the Greenburgh Town Council adopted a revision to the existing local law to require bagging or containerizing of leaves (see sample wording for the change in local law, on page 5).

Preceding and following this change, the Town Department of Public Works worked closely with the GNC to ensure that the public received information regarding leaf mulch mowing, the process of shredding leaves by using a mower fitted with mulching blades and leaving them onsite, as an alternative to bagging leaves. The GNC and the Town created an educational flyer (see page 6) that was sent to every resident of Unincorporated Greenburgh explaining the change in town policy and detailing the environmental and financial benefits of on-site leaf mulching. Integral to this educational process, the GNC offered four mulch mowing demonstrations and trainings for residents and landscapers in various neighborhoods and parks in Greenburgh. One of these free trainings was held at the GNC and specifically targeted Spanish speaking landscapers. Total attendance at these trainings was approximately 70 people. During the same period, 17 other mulch mowing trainings were offered in various municipalities in Westchester County with financial support from Westchester County.



Greenburgh residents were provided with GNC's phone number and the website for Love 'Em and Leave 'Em ([www.leleny.org](http://www.leleny.org)) as sources of further information. Throughout September and October, the GNC staff handled an average of 5 calls each week, in addition to some calls to the Department of Public Works, from residents who were unhappy or confused with the change in policy. Once the environmental and economic rationale for the bagging requirement was explained and callers were informed of the opportunity to avoid bagging leaves through mulch mowing, callers were typically satisfied.

Greenburgh posted prominent signs throughout the Town indicating the change in leaf collection policy and these signs were often paired with Love ‘Em & Leave ‘Em yard signs in key positions throughout the Town. The pairing of the signs communicating the leaf bagging requirement with the Love ‘Em & Leave ‘Em campaign was intended to encourage the public to learn about mulch mowing as an alternative to bagging their leaves.

### The Result

The transition, thanks to the extensive communication by the Town and the excellent support from the GNC, was remarkably smooth. Fears that leaves might be dumped or simply left on the street, were not realized. Most residents switched to bagging their leaves without protest. The small number of

“It cannot be stressed enough how important the bagging of leaves became when faced with the monumental debris clearing task from Hurricane Sandy. Highway crews were able to focus on debris clearing with our heavy equipment, while the sanitation crews were able to collect bagged leaves after the daily refuse collections. Because the leaves were in bags, no heavy equipment was needed to perform leaf collection and the leaves were cleared by mid-December.” **Victor Carosi, Commissioner of Public Works**

residents who initially left leaf piles curbside, eventually bagged or otherwise removed the leaves themselves. The Town did not collect any leaves left curbside in order to ensure that residents all understood that the policy had truly changed.

Despite the extensive debris left by Hurricane Sandy, during leaf collection season in 2012, the Town was able to eliminate five weekend days of overtime for the Highway, Sanitation, and Repair

Departments, saving well over \$100,000. They also reduced the equipment and property damage, fuel usage, and wear-and-tear on heavy equipment that attends loose leaf collection. In addition, despite the additional quantities of yard debris resulting from Hurricane Sandy, the Town completed its collection of leaves and woody debris earlier than during previous years. This was particularly important as the winter of 2012-2013 left more snow, and required more clean-up, than usual.

Importantly, the benefits from the change in policy continued through the leaf collection season in 2013. According to Deputy Commission of Public Works Richard Fon, in 2013 the collection process was once again completed much faster than was possible previously, with no overtime expense related to leaf collection. In addition, he noted that there have been many secondary, and sometimes unanticipated, benefits related to requiring bagging of leaves.

“You look back and say, ‘we must have been insane!’ In the past we spent two months every year, running at the finish line. Now it’s so easy we can’t even call it ‘Leaf Season’ anymore – we have to find a new name.” **Richard Fon, Deputy Commission of Public Works**

These benefits include fewer leaves in catch basins resulting in both less flooding and less time required to clean out the basins (e.g. where perhaps a vacuum truck had been able to clean five basins in day previously, now they are able to clean eight). Another benefit has been that the Equipment Repair Bureau, previously focused only on repairing leaf collection equipment throughout the collection

season, now is able to devote its attention and talents to other projects including preparing equipment for snow removal and completing projects for other departments. In addition, without leaf piles in the streets, the Town is able to deploy its street sweeping equipment, keeping roads cleaner year round.

These positive results were achieved despite a reduced public education effort the second year, comprised of the Town putting out a limited number of signs in English and Spanish reminding residents of the requirement to bag leaves. Richard Fon indicated that a small number of property owners received summonses for failing to bag leaves but that number was very limited and that the Town did not collect any leaf piles in 2013.

The Town of Greenburgh is now looking towards increased savings, through reduction in yard waste collected, as more residents become familiar with, and adopt the practice of, mulch mowing.

“Greenburgh did the right thing. Our new policy enabled the town to save money and to use our resources more efficiently. Our employees are able to focus their attention on cleaning up debris and keeping drains clear and we had more resources available to remove obstructions after the hurricane. Our new policy also encourages people to mulch their leaves—which is good for the lawns and good for the environment. I’m very pleased with the decision we made last year.” **Paul Feiner, Town Supervisor**

## Sample Language for Local Law to Require Bagging of Leaves

---

### LEAF PILE DEFINITION

An accumulation of leaves, twigs and other debris located on a public right-of-way, street and/or pedestrian walkway sufficient to cause vehicular and/or pedestrian traffic to deviate from a straight-line direction of travel or to obstruct the sight distance along the street or create drainage problems or obstruct any catch basin or fire hydrant.

### PICK UP

During the period designated by the Commissioner of Public Works for leaf collection (generally October through December), leaves for pick-up and collection must be placed in authorized bags or receptacles designated by the Commissioner of Public Works and may not be piled on the public right-of-way or any street or pedestrian walkway. A leaf pile shall create a rebuttable presumption that the landowner, lessee, or management agent of the premises most closely abutting the leaf pile threw, cast, lay, directed, suffered or permitted the leaf pile to be placed in this location.

The placement of leaf piles in the public right-of-way, street or pedestrian walkway is prohibited.

### ENFORCEMENT

Any violation of § \_\_\_\_ of this chapter shall, upon conviction, be punishable by a fine of not less than \$\_\_\_\_ and not more than \$\_\_\_\_ per offense. Each day the violation continues shall constitute a separate offense.



## New Town Policy

★ Town Will Not Pickup Loose leaves at Curbsides

★ Leaves Must be in Paper Bags or Open containers

Avoid the hassle, why not mulch?

Come to a Demonstration - Save a Date

<p>Sat., Sept. 29, 10 am at Longview Road (off Fort Hill) Scarsdale*</p> <p>Tues., Oct. 9, 10 am at, Hart's Brook Nature Preserve 156 Ridge Road Hartsdale*</p>	<p>Sat., Oct. 13, 2 pm at Greenburgh Nature Center 99 Dromore Road Scarsdale</p> <p>Tues., Oct. 16, 10 am at Travis Hill Park Lincoln Place White Plains - Fairview*</p>
---	--

\*Canceled if rain

More Mulching Demonstrations to be Scheduled Near You

Landscapers and Home Owners  
Learn to **MULCH MOW** your leaves:  
FREE demonstrations open to all

Town of Greenburgh  
177 Hillside Ave  
Greenburgh, NY, 10607

Greenburgh Nature Center  
(914)-813-1251  
Love 'Em & Leave 'Em  
[www.LELENY.org](http://www.LELENY.org)

Presort Standard  
US Postage  
Paid  
Permit 2002  
White Plains NY

## Help Us Make Greenburgh Greener and Mulch Better

By Steven Chen

---

*No need to bag - mulch mowing is cheaper, faster, easier*

### A Green Initiative

Traditionally, autumn brings piles of leaves to the curbs and streets of Greenburgh. This year, the Town is making a change – loose leaves will no longer be picked up curbside.

A better practice which avoids any additional hassle and expense this change may bring is to mulch mow your leaves back into the landscape that created them.

Mulch mowing will create healthier soil and better plants. It is an easy step towards a greener Town that do-it-your-selves and lawn care professionals can practice. With all of the free organic mulch-to-be soon raining down on us, why not mulch?

### We are Making Greener Changes!

- 📦 **We are changing our policy:** We will no longer be picking up loose leaves curbside. To be picked up by the Town, leaves must be bagged or in open containers.
- 🌿 An easier and more economical way than bagging is to keep your leaves on your property by **MULCH MOWING** them into your landscape.
- 📖 **LEARN HOW** to mulch mow your leaves easily and efficiently at one of the free programs listed on the other side.
- ♻️ Help **REDUCE** hundreds of thousands of dollars a year from the Town's leaf pickup costs **AND** keep your streets safer, landscape greener, environment healthier.

### What is Mulch Mowing?

Mulch mowing is a practice that changes yard "waste" into a landscape enhancement. It can be as simple as mowing over your leaves with your lawn mower where they fell. The leaf shreds fall below the grass blades and create a layer of loose organic mulch that provides slow release nutrients for your soil.

### What You Can Do

This year, instead of kicking your leaves to the curb, put them to work for you and mulch mow them. Come to one of the free programs or go to the "Love 'Em & Leave 'Em" website: [LELENY.org](http://LELENY.org) for more information. For questions about equipment call the **Greenburgh Nature Center (914-813-1251)**. If you are still dubious, try it on at least a part of your property to see how well it works.



