

Denying trash pickup to churches is shortsighted decision by council

To the Editor:

It seems like a no-brainer. Churches don't pay taxes, so they shouldn't get free trash pickups.

According to the article in The Daily News on June 2, the city has already made that decision. A few days later, The Daily News followed with an editorial commending the city for making the "right decision" on this issue.

In my opinion, this was the wrong decision, which was compounded by a confused and erroneous editorial.

The Daily News editorial said, "Obviously if a city cannot plow church parking lots for free, it cannot collect church garbage for free." But this is comparing apples and oranges. In Barrington, the town was giving something free to the churches (plowing) that everybody else had to pay for, whereas in Newport the city was giving to the churches (trash pickups) exactly what other Newporters also were receiving free. In no way was the city putting churches in a preferred position, which the town of Barrington was doing.

The editorial was also wrong in implying that providing municipal services to churches on the same basis as everyone else is unconstitutional. The United States Supreme Court upheld property tax exemptions for churches and other non-profit organizations in a 1970 case, *Walz v. Tax Commission*, even though churches receive the same

kitchen network, which at zero expense to the government provides at least one hot meal a day to hungry and homeless people in Newport (yes, there are some here!) nearly every day of the year. These soup kitchen meals are all served in churches, which pay for the meals, the utility bills and the general wear and tear on their buildings.

Or consider the most widely used safety net for the casualties of the liquor industry — Alcoholics Anonymous — which mostly meets in churches and other tax-exempt buildings such as the Seaman's Church Institute. It seems ironic that the many bars and taverns in Newport could benefit, by slightly reduced taxes, from the decision to deny trash pickup to the very institutions that allow their facilities to be used to help alcoholics.

Or think of the Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops and similar groups that are often housed in churches. The church that I attend, for example, has hosted a Boy Scout troop continuously since 1921 without ever charging for use of the building, janitorial services and so on.

Many other examples could be given, but the point has been made. The city's decision and the Daily News editorial imply that churches are freeloaders, undeserving of municipal services. The opposite is true. Churches give back to the city more than they receive and should at least be able to share in common

municipal services such as trash pickup.

The other reasons why the decision to deny trash pickup was wrong can be more briefly stated. If it is true, as pointed out in the Daily News editorial, that most Newport churches already pay for trash collection and that this ruling only affects the few that do not, then what is the city trying to prove? Presumably those churches that do not already pay for trash pickup are those who have the smallest congregations — and therefore the least amount of trash and the least amount of money to pay for trash removal.

Finally, since the city already has contracted for the pickup of trash, and that contract has not been renegotiated to get a lower price for not servicing the churches, the city and the taxpayers of Newport will not save a single penny by this decision. What it does is allow the company that agreed for a certain price to pick up trash throughout the city to do less work than agreed.

So the decision which The Daily News commends comes down to this: The city has decided to deny trash pickup to probably the smallest and poorest of the local churches, to save no money for taxpayers and to relieve the trash collecting company of an obligation which by contract it agreed to perform.

Sounds like a bad decision to me.

Roland F. Chase
Newport

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municipal services that taxpayers receive. To my knowledge, no case has even intimated that treating non-taxpaying churches the same as taxpayers in providing such services is unconstitutional.

As to the basic policy question of whether churches should continue to receive free trash pickups in Newport, there are three reasons why I believe the answer should be yes.

First, although churches do not pay taxes, they do give back to the community far more than their modest share of taxes would be.

I am not talking about religious or intangible benefits churches provide to their members. I'm referring to the many programs and activities hosted by churches that directly benefit Newport and its citizens.

Take, for example, the soup