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The Reactor

Service Bureaucratized

It was too good to last. Another efficient, cheerful, friendly institution has been twisted into a time-wasting, bureaucratic, maddening, even a sad caricature of itself.

July 2 was trash dumping day at the foot of Linda Mar Boulevard, as it has been the first Saturday of most months for many years. It used to be a time when you could exchange smiles and hellos with neighbors and old friends, and dispose fairly fast of broken toys, lawn clippings, shrubbery cuttings, and other trash you had been accumulating too long.

"Trash Saturday" was a safety valve. Cars parked every which way. People lugged trash over to the trucks and cheerfully stood in line with the smile.

It looked like total chaos, but the system worked. The whole process might take 10 minutes if you had a small amount to get rid of.

By contrast, when my son and I arrived at the foot of Linda Mar Boulevard the first Saturday of July, the traffic cones were out and two lines of cars inched their way around a great oval. Creep forward! Stop! Turn off the key! Cuss! Wait! Creep forward! Stop! Turn off the key! Wait!

It took 45 minutes to creep around the interminable oval. Each car was emptied in turn. My estimate is that the old system was four times faster at getting the job done.

No more cheerful lines of people. No more smiles. No more exchanges of greetings. Now we sit in our cars. We waste our time. We grumble, glumly checking and rechecking our watches—cussing the guy who thought this up. What was a pleasant chore is now a grim traffic jam.

The monthly trash disposal is not just a convenience for a few. Without this safety valve, trash will become more of a safety hazard than it already is. Pacificans will give in more and more to the temptation to dump trash along roadways and in empty lots. If you know that it will take 45 minutes to an hour to dump your stuff, you will probably put off the task, or dispose of it anywhere.

I don't know who thought up the monthly "Safety Valve" tradition, but I tip my hat to him. It was a creative solution to a continuing problem. Each individual's trash is a problem to the community. Getting rid of it properly helps everyone. Designing delay and inefficiency into the system will reduce the total amount of trash disposed of each month, which may help Coastside Scavengers. However, the trash that would have been disposed of will not evaporate.

It will simply accumulate, either in garages, or yards, or littering back streets. It will become a festering nuisance. How many people will invest almost two hours, as my son and I did, in disposing of two small loads of trash? I don't own a van or a pickup truck, which would have cut my time to one trip and "only" 45 minutes.

The old system wasn't broke. Why are we fixing it? Yes, it had a few flaws. Out-of-towners and businesses sometimes abused the hospitality. Let's remedy that without giving up the relative speed and efficiency—and the pleasures—of the traditional system.