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Opt-out program results in fewer phone books delivered in Seattle

One year later, Seattle's program to allow residents to opt out of phone-book deliveries is exceeding expectations.

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A fifth of Seattle's households and businesses have called in, gone online or mailed a postcard canceling delivery of unwanted telephone books in less than a year since the city started its opt-out program, a turnout city officials say has exceeded expectations.

"Sometimes we roll out new programs and it takes awhile to understand what is going, on but this time we've had tons of people reach out to us," said City Councilmember Mike O'Brien, who proposed the program in 2010 to address issues of waste surrounding unwanted books.

Since the program began last May, more than 75,000 Seattle residents and businesses stopped their yellow-pages deliveries, removing 375 tons — more than 419,000 books — from the waste and recycle streams, according to city officials.

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) calculated that the city had spent as much as \$300,000 a year to recycle phone books.

The program requires SPU to keep a registry of people who do not want to receive phone books and to deliver that information to publishers. In addition, it requires that phone-book publishers honor the registry or be fined \$125 per wrong delivery.

The opt-out program was met with some opposition, including a lawsuit by publishers that found its way to U.S. District Court, where the ordinance was upheld.

Since the program began, residents have made only a few complaints and no companies have been fined. They are permitted a small margin of error for incorrect deliveries.

Amy Healy, vice president for public policy and sustainability for the Local Search Association, a yellow-pages trade organization, said that while the group does not support Seattle's ordinance, it does support consumers' right to refuse directory delivery and provides its own opt-out service.

However, she emphasized that the association supports many local companies that use yellow pages for advertising and said publishers have made strides "to make sure the product getting out to consumers is a useful and helpful resource."

To stop delivery of Dex phone books in June and July, residents need to opt out by May 22. O'Brien is working with the city to reach more people, including printing materials in various languages. He said he hopes to have 100,000 people opting out by the end of the year.

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