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Cleaning Up After Waste Management

Contract disputes are never pretty. But this summer, when the company responsible for picking up Oakland's garbage locked out its truck drivers in the middle of contract negotiations, we learned that these disputes can literally stink.

For the entire month of July, garbage piled up on sidewalks and in alleys next to homes, schools, restaurants and businesses across Oakland after Waste Management of Alameda County's ill-advised decision to lock out its garbage truck drivers during one of the hottest months of the year.

In just two and a half weeks, the City's recycling hotline received more than 2,000 complaints – an all-time record – about uncollected garbage.

The whole smelly affair never should have happened. Waste Management is contractually obligated to collect the city's garbage, green waste and recycling. Failure to do so was not just a violation of the company's contractual agreement – it was also a blatantly irresponsible threat to the health and welfare of Oakland citizens.

Waste Management's claim that it acted to preempt a strike lacked credibility. From the beginning, the lockout appeared to be a union-busting move, with the residents of Oakland and other cities suffering the consequences.

During the lockout, the City spent an extraordinary amount of staff time and resources fielding phone calls, sending out enforcement officers and taking Waste Management to court to honor its contract.

On Day 17 of the lockout, the City's argument won in Superior Court. Judge Richard Keller ruled that Waste Management was creating "irreparable harm to the health and safety" of the people of Oakland. With pressure from City leaders, the company and the union ratified a contract, and full service was restored in the beginning of August.

Waste Management rightly promised to prorate garbage bills for the month that Oakland went without service. Although the company has reportedly issued refunds on a case-by-case basis, it has yet to announce a full month's rebate for residential customers. We expect the company to stand by its verbal promise to give residents a month's rebate to make up for lost service, and that an announcement on the matter will be forthcoming.

There's also the question of the significant resources the City brought to bear on cleaning up Waste Management's mess. By any standard, the City should be reimbursed for costs incurred during the company's illegal lockout.

Waste Management needs to know that no one gets away with trashing Oakland.