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A Better Garbage Truck

Back in November I unloaded a curmudgeonly column complaining about a new national regulation governing the noise levels of garbage trucks. I said it was a petty, stupid, nit-picking regulation, destructive of state and local responsibilities, and all of those comments stand.

But I am minded to return to the topic because of a letter from Memphis. There is indeed a better way of coping with the problem: It is the way of the marketplace in a free economy.

The letter comes from Raymond Hughes, deputy purchasing administrator for Shelby County, Tenn. The answer to the noise problem, in his view, lies in the "Buy Quiet" program initiated by the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing and the National League of Cities. Unlike the federal regulation, which is complexity itself, this program is simplicity itself. It rests solidly upon the ancient law of supply and demand.

Mr. Hughes sums up the procedure succinctly: "Cities and counties that want quieter trucks ask for them; those that do not, don't."

The "Buy Quiet" plan was launched about 18 months ago. In this period, the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing has begun to establish product specifications not only for garbage trucks, but for many other pieces of machinery also. Shelby County, for example, sought bids on 10 "quieter" lawnmowers.

"We had no trouble in obtaining a sufficient number of bids," Mr. Hughes reports, "and the prices we paid were no higher than before. We plan to follow the same approach in future purchases of jackhammers, garbage trucks and other noisy items."

New Orleans has undertaken some pioneer efforts in this direction. An environmental report from the National League of Cities advises that such cities as Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, Pittsburgh and Austin also are purchasing quieter models of lawn equipment, air compressors and pavement breakers. In Iowa, the Scott County Purchasing Association is working with the city of Davenport and nine other units to buy quiet products only. Forty purchasing units in north-central Texas have established a purchasing cooperative.

"Buy Quiet" Cities

In Minnesota, the league identifies Minneapolis, St. Paul and Bloomington as "Buy Quiet" cities. Some of the programs embrace not only outside equipment but also such indoor noisemakers as vacuum cleaners and typewriters.

Surely this approach is infinitely preferable to the heavy-handed approach taken by the Environmental Protection Agency in the matter of garbage trucks. If you recall, the EPA went at this essentially local problem with the politesse of a Black Angus bull. The EPA's idea of how to get quieter garbage trucks is to threaten manufacturers with a \$25,000 fine and a year in prison, or both, if henceforth they market a truck that produces noise in excess of 79 decibels.

If we believe in the marketplace system, why do we not give the system a reasonable chance to work? Instead of imposing uniformity by federal decree, why do we not try variety for a change? One of our cherished principles is "local responsibility." Why not abide by that principle?

To be sure, there is a place for national regulation of products that might be truly dangerous to the public health or safety. Even the most dedicated friends of free enterprise stop short of condoning botulism in the vichyssoise. But a decent respect for federalism ought to teach us that national regulation should be the last resort, not the first.