

Grunts of the litter

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Summertime, and the livin' is stinky.

On a humid morning in Harlem, groups of New Yorkers hit the streets to pick up empty bottles, tattered PPE and other kinds of trash accumulating all over the city amid a recent budget cut to the Department of Sanitation.

"While we're still going through this epidemic, our streets have just been filthy," Virginia Fields told the Daily News during a cleanup of several Harlem blocks. "The trash has been piling up."

Fields, a former Manhattan borough president, is among the local leaders taking things into their own hands as the city reduces litter bin pickup and street cleaning.

The 125th St. Business Improvement District has held weekly cleanups since the start of August and plans to do so at least until October.

Fields has been overseeing a handful of youths hired by a local nonprofit hired to pitch in.

"It feels really good to be helping out because it's really a problem everywhere," Johannie Herrera, 15, said during a short pause from cleaning up trash with a long picker tool.

A few paces away, a group of residents were bagging trash on a block of stately brownstones on 139th St. near Adam Clayton Powell Blvd.

"These streets desperately need cleaning," said Rod Fouquet, president of the local block association. "The residents here always do their part. The city is not doing its part."

Fouquet lamented changes to alternate-side parking rules the city introduced after the coronavirus outbreak. Blocks that previously had parking restrictions twice a week are now down to once a week, meaning fewer street cleanings.

On top of that, the recently passed budget includes a cut \$106 million for the Sanitation Department.

As one of several cost-saving measures, DSNY reduced litter bin pickup. Sunday and



Volunteers (left to right) Princess Keo, Chayenne Reding and Johannie Herrera from Uptown Dreamers clean trash in Harlem. Below, Jacki Peralta sweeps up in East New York, Brooklyn.

City cutbacks force nabes to pick up after themselves

holiday service was canceled and some bins that used to be collected twice a day are now only picked up once, a DSNY spokeswoman said.

"The Department of Sanitation remains committed to keeping New York City healthy, safe and clean," spokeswoman Belinda Mager said.

Citywide, 311 complaints about trash have soared. From July 1 to Aug. 17, complaints of overflowing bins quadrupled, from 281 in 2019 to 1,189 this year. Generic garbage complaints doubled to 2,626.

Still, Mayor de Blasio has made little public mention of the waste woes.

When asked about trash piling up on Aug. 24, the mayor said, "the city is coming back and anyone [who] doesn't understand that isn't paying a lot of attention."

The city Parks Department took a \$84 million budget cut. As a result, the department couldn't hire seasonal workers to help clean green spaces.

"The government has left a void that communities themselves are filling," said Councilman Ritchie Torres (D-Bronx), who has been organizing regular park cleanups in his district. "Even in a time of



Yet Torres recounted "garbage everywhere" in locations including Claremont Park and Mount Eden Malls.

The stinky situation in Midtown "depends on the day," said Mario Messina of the 29th Street Neighborhood Association.

Messina said building supers and volunteers are doing their best to bag trash and alert the authorities when they see pileups.

"It is difficult to cope with this unless you ... really have the whole neighborhood that cleans up," he said.

Not every nook of New York appears to be suffering the trashy effects of the budget cuts.

"In Carnegie Hill, we are blessed with a really very predictable, stable environment," said Joanna Cawley of the group Carnegie Hill Neighbors. "Because we're also a historic district, a lot of our residents really take pride in the streetscape."

Other neighborhoods are not so lucky.

"Something has to be done," said Barbara Askins, president of the 125th St. Business Improvement Association. "The community is not going to be able to keep it up forever."

multibillion-dollar deficits, it strikes me as shortsighted of the city to disinvest from park maintenance and trash pickups because nothing demoralizes a city and a community like visible signs of decay."

The Parks Department insisted it is doing its best with the reduced manpower.

"Our maintenance crews along with the support of volunteer groups are working hard to address trash in our green spaces," spokeswoman Crystal Howard said.