

## New York volunteers pick up trash as city cuts collections

Complaints about dirty sidewalks grow after pandemic-related fall in tax revenues hits services



Ann Cutbill Lenane and Jake Russell, the co-founders of OneBlock UWS

### **Mamta Badkar, Billy Nauman and Marc Filippino** OCTOBER 3 2020

Many people see garbage on the upper west side of Manhattan these days and shake their heads. Ann Cutbill Lenane looks over the trash and dreams of romance.

Ms Lenane, a 58-year-old single mother who works as a luxury property broker at Douglas Elliman, is a co-founder of a volunteer army — called OneBlock UWS — that has taken to cleaning up the neighbourhood amid complaints it has become dirtier during the pandemic.

The group has signed up 500 people, and Ms Lenane has grown so enthusiastic about the enterprise that she has talked with cofounder Jake Russell, a transplanted Texan, about expanding its activities.

“I want to do a singles garbage night,” she said. “I mean, I might meet my guy leaning over a garbage can.”

The rise of the citizen garbage collector on the well-to-do upper west side — and in other areas of New York — comes as the city struggles to provide basic government services during the Covid-19 crisis.

Mayor Bill de Blasio estimates that lockdowns have led to a loss of \$9bn in tax revenues, and that has sent city officials scrambling to cut costs.

Reductions in sanitation spending led to a dramatic reduction during the summer — from 736 to 272 — in the number of trucks emptying out litter collection baskets on city streets every week.

New Yorkers did not like the results. Complaints about dirty sidewalks on the city’s 311 telephone hotline hit 2,922 in July and August, up 14 per cent from the same period a year ago.

“With the corner basket pick-ups, they cut us down to three days a week (from every day), which is insane,” said Justin Brannan, a City Council member from Brooklyn’s Bay Ridge neighbourhood.

The city’s sanitation commissioner, Kathryn Garcia, stepped down on September 8, expressing displeasure with the budget cuts.

Two days later, more than 160 business leaders, including the chief executives of Citigroup, Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, expressed their alarm. They sent a letter to Mr de Blasio warning of “widespread anxiety over public safety, cleanliness

The fights over garbage collection point to bigger battles to come over paying for city services. Mr de Blasio has repeatedly beseeched the federal government for help and sought approval from state lawmakers to allow the city to borrow billions to close the budget gap.

Mr Brannan of Bay Ridge said the city's financial situation is unsustainable. While he said he agreed "with a lot" of the sentiments expressed by the CEOs in their letter, he added: "I wish it would have ended with 'and we were going to set up a fund to help' — because we don't have the money."

Progressives are pushing for higher taxes on the wealthy to pay for services. But such a proposal would need approval by the state, and Governor Andrew Cuomo has opposed such calls on the grounds they would cause people to leave for lower-tax locales.

Tax-increase advocates say the state's history shows Mr Cuomo is wrong. In 2009, New York state levied a "millionaire's tax" in 2009 to help cover its budget shortfall during the financial crisis. Despite fears this would drive away the wealthy, IRS data show the number of people in New York City making more than \$1m per year grew by 22,000 from 2010 to 2018.

Jamaal Bowman, a Democrat running for a US House seat in a district that includes parts of the Bronx, said it was a "false narrative" to suggest the rich would flee. "Many millionaires or billionaires have said on the record that they will not leave," he said. "People love the city of New York."

Such affection depends on a pronounced local tolerance for griminess. Given the city's lack of alleyways and a chaotic network of 90 companies that collect commercial trash, New York has never been the cleanest of US cities.

This year, with many restaurants shut down, New York's massive rat population has grown more aggressive, appearing more frequently on the streets during daylight hours to look for food, experts say.

"The rats . . . took more risks, including travelling farther to obtain food," said Michael Parsons, visiting research scholar at Fordham University's biology department. "Rats are competing and even cannibalising."

Still, the citizenry on the upper west side is resolute.

Mr Russell of OneBlock UWS said he was moved to collect litter by "Covid angst" and "the pent-up inability to help". To begin, he picked up a bag full of trash, and posted a picture of it on Facebook.

"I started walking outside and felt like here's something that bothers me and I have control of," he said. "In 15 minutes, I can see the results."

So strong was the response to his posting that he started a Google sign-up form to see if any of his neighbours would adopt a block to clean up. Initially, volunteers equipped with trash pickers from hardware stores bagged litter to take back to their residential bins.