

How often should you sweep streets? What is the best frequency for my community?

Well it depends! The most obvious factors include:

- How dirty the gutters get between sweeps
- What your acceptable level of cleanliness is
- How much you can afford
- What coming regulations will require
- How well you can control the landscape irrigation

Remember the reason cities sweep is seldom aesthetics, even though at times cleanliness seems like the paramount goal. The main goal is to remove debris before it is flushed into the storm drains and to allow the easy flow of water to reduce algae and the liability of its slippery effects.

If streets stayed clean there would be no reason to sweep. However, gutters are the natural accumulation site for litter, leaves, landscaping material, and even dust and dirt that settles on the street from the wind. Normal traffic movement blows 97% of the debris into the gutters. This debris then sits in the gutter blocking irrigation water flow and is tracked by cars into driveways and garages.

When it rains the debris is flushed into the storm drain system and can clog it, causing local flooding, or it washes to our bays and ocean. While flood control channels were never meant to be clean enough areas for swimming or fishing, taking reasonable steps to remove debris before it gets into the pipes and channels is worthwhile.

How dirty the gutters get between sweeps is the result of many factors:

- Irrigation runoff – wet gutters hold debris
- Age and street condition
- Landscape maturity and type
- Littering habits of residents and motorists

What your acceptable level of street cleanliness is can cause debate among neighbors.

Items to consider include:

- How often are the neighboring city streets swept, by which your community is compared?
- Are your gutters maintaining your property values or detracting from them?
- When the algae lands you in court for a slip and fall, have you taken reasonable steps to reduce it?
- If your kids ride bikes or play in the street, are the streets clean enough?
- Do low spots drain or are they turning septic and smelly?
- Is debris from the street tracking into your home?
- Is lack of sweeping, speeding up the need for costly street repairs or resurfacing?
- Is the backed up water in the gutter causing the sweeper to leave an unsightly stain?

(No sweeper can effectively handle water in the gutter without some staining. Less water by coordinating the automatic timers, or less water because frequent sweeping allows it to flow better, both result in less staining.)

- Are sweeping results optimized?

(Frequency of sweeping has an effect on how clean sweepers can get a street, just like in landscaping. You have one lawn that is mowed once a week and the other once a month. If they both get mowed the same day, the weekly one sure looks better. The same applies to streets.)

- Is enough of the street being swept?

(Most HOAs will have some cars parked in the street. The sweeper will obviously miss these areas, and that portion of curb will go twice as long between sweeps. Assuming cars cause 10% of the curb to be missed each sweep, and assuming it is a different 10% next service....if swept weekly then 100% will be swept at least twice per month.)

- Do the streets meet your personal test?

(No matter what frequency, check the streets the day before the sweep. Are they acceptable, based on all the above criteria? Of course they won't be clean, but are they acceptable? If so, you're sweeping often enough. If not, then increased frequency is in order.)

How much can you afford? With so many items competing for a community's dollars this can be the toughest call of all. Fortunately sweeping can be one of the smaller line items in the budget. Sweeping can also extend street life reducing this major expense.

Keep in mind the savings for increased frequencies. Weekly sweeping is a 100% increase in service over twice per month, yet may only cost 60-80% more.

Higher frequencies have a lower number of parked cars. Staying off the street every Wednesday is easier to remember than the 1st & 3rd Wednesday. Sweeping only the 3rd Wednesday each month is almost impossible to remember. Fewer parked cars mean more of the gutter is swept resulting in more value for funds spent.

What will coming regulations require? Thinking long term, sweeping at least weekly and perhaps installation of expensive catch basin filters/trash catchers may be required. Storm Water runoff regulations are coming and while it's hard to determine what will be required to meet them, it will be much more costly.

Street sweeping is considered a BMP or Best Management Practice and will be part of a community's storm water runoff permit.

How well you can control the landscape irrigation to keep the gutters dry on sweep day is the number one thing a community can do to have clean streets.

For communities that can't (or think they can't) reduce the water flowing into the gutters from homeowner irrigation, sweeping more often will reduce debris flowing into the storm drains and improve the water flow in the gutters.

The flatter and wetter a street is, the more likely it will need weekly sweeping. Streets with sloped and thus dry streets may get away with twice per month or even monthly sweeping. (At least until regulations force the issue.)

For more information please contact:

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