



Trash Talk

Trash Talk

What do these items have in common? An open can of chili, a set of blinds, a can of paint, a bag of white flour, a packet of metal coat hangers, an eighteen-inch pizza box, a set of law books, a worn-out rug, and a family photo?

They are all items that have been sent down our trash chutes, and they have either plugged the chute or stopped the compacting mechanism from working effectively. These items—and dozens of others—have cost the Ellington thousands of dollars in the past four years.

Now, none of us have purposely set out to damage the trash chute and compactor. These are generally innocent mistakes that occur because we don't understand exactly what happens when we pad down the hall in our socks and open that little door to get rid of "whatever."

In the nanosecond that we spend thinking about where our trash goes, we assume it smoothly speeds its way into a big, closed container where it is crunched up into a tidy package and hauled out of our lives forever!

Well, we are wrong!

KNOW YOUR TRASH CHUTE

Here are some facts that may surprise you!

- The trash chute opening that's on every floor is about thirteen inches square and the big tube the trash travels through is just short of two feet across.
- The chutes in both towers are 130 feet long, reaching from the twelfth floor to the trash room. That is almost half a football field!
- The chute has not one, but two elbows near the bottom. (That's where the pizza box will lodge when its twelve-inch width becomes twenty-four inches, because the lid has opened up.)
- The inside of the chute is not completely smooth because it is made of sheet metal and joined in sections. Therefore, there may be some exposed edges and coatings of "yucky stuff" in that chute—just enough to cause something to become stuck.
- Trash that enters the chute from the twelfth floor is traveling at 62 mph by the time it reaches the bottom of the chute. (Is your trash packaged to travel at that speed?)
- At the bottom of the 130-foot chute, beyond the two elbows, is six feet of open space before that bag of trash hits the compactor—space that is required by the fire department.

Working beside that open space several times a day is—think, think, who could it be?—our very own building engineer, Paul Jacobs! Paul has been splattered with paint, pickle juice, chili, and nail polish, and has even been cut with flying glass.

CRUNCH, CRUNCH

But once everything reaches the compactor, it's all crunched into neat and tidy packages, right? Not quite.

On the job and within trash compactors there are the "workers" and the "watchers." The compactor has a "worker eye" that sees your trash enter the compactor, and it swings the compactor into action, crunching, crunching, and crunching. A problem results when something covers the eye such as flour, a floating family photo, paint, or a lettuce leaf—causing the compactor, just like a dedicated employee with a deadline, to work even harder!



Trash Talk

When the motor runs continuously it will eventually overheat, which causes it to wear out more quickly than it should. Replacement costs currently run about \$1,200, but that doesn't begin to factor in the costs associated with the time needed to deal with the backed up trash that would have to be managed if the motor "dies."

Fortunately, the compactor has a "watcher." The watcher, having paid attention during supervisory training, kicks in and says, "Stop! Something is wrong! Even those overeaters in the Ellington can't produce that much trash!"

The watcher shuts the motor down. No more crunch, crunch. This saves the motor, but the trash then backs up into the chute and lodges in the elbows. Paul has to restart the motor manually and then has to spend hours poking and prodding to get things moving again.

YOU MEAN MY TRASH ISN'T OUT YET?

Landing in the compactor and being crunched is not the end of the journey for your trash. In the final part of this process your trash is crushed against the trash already in the container. When the containers are full, Paul disconnects them by hand from the compacting mechanism and moves them out of the trash compactor rooms into the alley for pickup by the city twice a week.

Here is an important fact; compacted trash doesn't drop *into* the container; it is forced through an opening in the *side* of the compactor and into the *side* of the container, which remains open when Paul moves the trash containers out to the alley. This is where any poorly packaged material such as kitty litter that spills out of an unsecured bag in flight drops onto the floor in the trash room. When kitty litter, which should not be put down the trash chute, mixes with food juices, chili, and paint (which also should not be put down the chute), a gooey, smelly mess is created.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

With a little information and attention, everything goes smoothly down the chute, and our dues don't go up because of money wasted on fixing trash chute problems. Paul is not wounded, and he is able to focus his attention on the zillions of other tasks that keep us happy, comfortable, and safe.

Here are the guidelines:

1. Put trash down the chute and recycling in the recycling room on Level B. (The front desk has a brochure that clearly explains the difference.)
2. Collect trash in a sturdy plastic bag and TIE the bag shut so it won't open in mid flight.
3. Do not put anything down the chute that weighs more than ten pounds and make sure no dimension is greater than eighteen inches.
4. Never put liquids in glass or cans down the chute. If they don't burst when they hit the elbows, they will burst when they hit the compactor.
5. Anything with a dimension bigger than eighteen inches, heavier than ten pounds, or that doesn't qualify as TRASH belongs in the green bin in the recycling room on Level B. This is the place for big pizza boxes, bed pillows, books, rugs, blinds, and anything else you aren't sure about.
6. Instruct contractors, painters, other workers—and even guests—in the correct use of the trash chute. Our rules state that as the owner, you—not the contractor, worker, or guest will be fined and also required to pay for damages and clean-up.



Trash Talk

CONSEQUENCES

Trash chute issues are ongoing but all of them can be prevented. Here are just a few of the negative repercussions of not abiding by the guidelines:

OTHER WORK WAITS—When the chute becomes plugged, Paul spends a minimum of thirty minutes clearing it, and sometimes many hours. This means that Paul's other work comes to a complete stop.

DUES INCREASE—Several years ago, after someone plugged up the North Tower chute with cardboard boxes, the Ellington brought in contractors to drill through two layers of steel to make openings at the doglegs in both towers. This cost over \$3,000. Expenses such as this make the board's ongoing pursuit of keeping dues down more difficult.

INJURIES OCCUR—There is no way to clear the debris other than hand-to-hand, man-to-chute combat! When the chute needs to be unplugged, injuries occur. Bruises are common. Using great force in proximity to exposed sheet metal edges coated with foul debris is a recipe for workman's compensation claims. None of us want claims, and none of us want our good people placed in such a compromising situation.

Our rules are very strict about trash chute use and our property management company relentlessly pursues those who cause damage. The resident who sent the law library down the chute paid over \$1,000 in damages because a contractor had to be brought in to go inside the chute to unplug it.

THE FUTURE

We hope that the information in this article will help everyone make better choices about the use of the trash chute. What's more, in 2006 we will have an additional reason to focus on trash—the city is about to begin imposing fines when trash is mixed with recycling. Your board is monitoring this new requirement carefully and will soon begin to provide you with information about the differences between trash and recycling, and what we as individual residents need to do to avoid these fines.

We believe that when our residents have the right information, they do the right thing.

THIS ARTICLE WAS APPROVED FOR PUBLICATION BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON JULY 26, 2005.