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Storage containers face crackdowns

Local PODS franchisees support NCCo law limiting time bins can remain on property

Staff and wire reports

WASHINGTON -- Oh, no. The neighbors have brought in PODS.

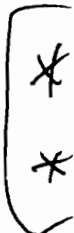
These portable storage containers can be one of the first hints that a home is being prepared for sale. They promise a more convenient alternative to schlepping junk out to a mini-warehouse. The big box is in your driveway; you have the only key; you can load and unload on your own schedule.

It's just that neighbors often fail to see the charm of the containers, or the equally garish boxes rented out by the many competitors to that market-leading company, Portable On Demand Storage. That's especially so when the boxes remain for months.

If they're on the street, they tie up parking space and can be a traffic hazard. Elsewhere, they're just ugly, with giant logos and 1-800 phone numbers plastered on the sides.

Driven by complaining constituents, some local governments are drafting regulations to make the containers a little less convenient -- and sometimes quite a bit more expensive.

"The jurisdictions are starting to crack down, if you will, on containerized storage," said Tom Johnston, an owner of Store to Door, a company in the Washington region.



New Castle County Council did exactly that earlier this year.

After hearing complaints from homeowners, council passed an ordinance limiting the time such units can remain in place anywhere on the property to 30 days, or the duration of a building permit.

In most community codes, it's the homeowner's responsibility to comply with regulations about container placement. People are less likely to owe fees if they place the containers in their driveway or the back of the house. But even if it's in a driveway, some jurisdictions balk if the box remains for more than a month.

One reason the boxes linger is that rentals typically are for a minimum of one month. Renters can have it hauled away after a week or two, but would still owe a full month's rent. If customers were to pay for only a few days, it wouldn't bring in enough revenue to cover delivery costs.

"We lose money on every delivery," Johnston said. "I'm a storage guy."

Container rental is not inexpensive. Renting a 12-foot-long unit from PODS for a month would cost about \$385. Local government permits and fees can add significantly to the cost, especially if you have to pay in both your old and new neighborhoods. The fees could make it less expensive to hire full-service movers.

For example, to place a container on a street in suburban Montgomery County, Md., a renter must pay a \$137.50 fee and post a \$1,000 bond to compensate the county if the box damages the street. Boxes left on the street for more than a few days cost more. A renter who leaves a container out for more than 30 days could be asked to move it to the backyard and obtain a permit for constructing a shed.

New Castle County's legislation had the support of Jay Williams and Jim Coker, co-owners of a New Castle franchise

of PODS. Customers arrange for a unit to be delivered to their home or business, then call for the unit to be picked up and stored in the company's warehouse.

Williams said he wants the containers to be useful, but not upsetting to neighbors. "We try to make customers understand what those parameters are," Williams said referring to the New Castle County ordinance.

In the majority of cases, the people doing the moving are done in a short time, he said.

"We really have a service that is targeted at people who are moving or storing -- it is really not supposed to be a storage shed," Williams said. "The main time when someone would have it there for more than a week or two is if they are making major improvements to the house."

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