

A group of fifth-graders at Stillwater's Rutherford Elementary fought the law - and won

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Rutherford Elementary students, from left, Alex Serier, Ryan Kilmer, Alex Huckels and Dylan Cook negotiate Delano Way in Stillwater. (Pioneer Press: John Doman)

POLITICS

A group of fifth-graders at Stillwater's Rutherford Elementary fought the law — and won. Troubled by trash bins cluttering streets on the way to school, they got the city to change the rules.

By Megan Boldt

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Civics became personal this year for a group of fifth-graders at Rutherford Elementary.

They enjoy walking and biking to their Stillwater school. But on trash-pickup days, their trek was a bit treacherous. Sometimes, they had to ride in the middle of narrow, winding roads to weave around trash cans and garbage haulers.

So the team of kids, called the Twizbots, went to the city council and got things changed. Stillwater's garbage ordinance now defines "curbside" as the side of the curb opposite the traveled portion of the roadway.

"I think so many times kids think that people don't listen to them. To be proven to, at that age, that you can make a difference ... I think that's a powerful message," said parent Teresa Cook.

The idea grew out of a project the team worked on for this year's First Lego League season. Teams complete a research project on a global issue and build robots that can complete multiple missions.

This year's theme, "Smart Move," required students to create an innovative solution for moving people, information or things in their community. The Twizbots decided to take on trash and recycling.

They found that

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each of Stillwater's 18,000 residents creates about 4.4 pounds of trash and recyclables a day, which means 554,000 pounds of waste being hauled through the streets each week. The Twizbots did more research and found a waste-removal system called Envac, which uses a high-pressure vacuum to move trash, recycling and compost through underground pipes to a central location.

Disney World has used such a system for about three decades. Montreal has installed one, as well. In existing neighborhoods, the system usually is installed during road repairs.

Alex Serier, 11, said Montreal was able to install the system for about \$8 million and expected to get a return on its investment in 12 years. The system has a lifetime of about 60 years, he said.

"It's pretty economical if you have the money to build it," Alex said.

The Twizbots took first in regional competition with their trash-moving project and went on to state. But they wanted to use what they'd learned to do something in the community.

The team knew it would be a tall task to get the Envac system installed in Stillwater any time soon. So instead, they decided to take on the trash cans that sat in the road during pick-up day.

"Pretty much all of us like to bike or walk to school, but with the cans in the roads and cars trying to drive around them, it made it pretty hard," said 10-year-old Dylan Cook. "And it wasn't very safe."

The kids found out after talking to representatives at Waste Management that Stillwater residents were supposed to keep their trash and recycling containers off the street. But the city's definition of "curbside" was too vague to make that enforceable.

So in January, the students talked about their idea at the open forum portion of a city council meeting.

The council put the proposed ordinance change on its February agenda and then approved it.

The Twizbots then went door to door with leaflets listing trash safety tips.

"I give those kids all the credit in the world for taking the initiative on this," said city council member Mike Polehna. "They saw a problem and wanted to fix it."

Polehna, who listened to the Twizbots' pitch before they went to the full council, said maybe Washington County could look at the Envac system down the line for beaches or new parks. He is the county's parks manager for maintenance and operations.

"I didn't even know that kind of technology existed," he said. "The level of research they did was amazing."

Just two weeks ago, the Twizbots got a copy of the ordinance changes from the city, with a letter attached from administration secretary Nancy Manos.

She wrote: "Who said you can't fight City Hall?"

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