

Borough Preps for Bears Showing Up Around Town

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

A bountiful berry season and strong salmon runs have kept most bears out of residential areas this year, but the borough assembly is already gearing up for hungry bruins to start showing up around town. During last night's borough work session the assembly heard from a number of key players in promoting bear awareness, including Kodiak Site Manager for Alaska Waste, Rick Vahl. He talked about various educational materials going out to customers to help individuals be more bear aware. Assemblywoman Louise Stutes said she appreciated those efforts, but wasted no time asking Vahl why Kodiak has yet to see bear proof roll carts. He said it's a hard call to make, particularly because they're really only needed four months out of the year.

“So I think if we were to switch year round to go bear resistant, I think that could be a viable option. And we kind of look at that. I don't know that it's viable to train the public to switch for only four months. It's pretty difficult just to switch to dumpsters and switch to some of the latches. I think it is viable and it's still on the table. I'm sorry I don't remember five years ago and some of the promises that were made about the bear resistant roll carts. We have tested a few and they are more cumbersome for the customer, and like you mentioned, our operation.”

Vahl added that there really isn't such a thing as a bear “proof” roll cart, but rather a bear resistant one. Basically, one that is harder for a bear to get into. He said those run about \$300 each, where as current roll carts used around town are roughly \$46 each.

Assemblyman Aaron Griffin asked that Alaska Waste do a full analysis of what it would cost to replace all roll carts with bear resistant ones, including the additional cost of operations by Alaska Waste. Vahl said he would work on getting those numbers back to the assembly.

Assemblyman Mel Stephens said he wasn't sure they are taking a close enough look at roll carts in general, and whether or not they are actually feasible in Kodiak.

“Maybe we've just gotten more bears. But it seems to me, that this bear problem, that the big increase, very suspiciously has come right along with the fact that we moved to roll carts and I think we need to think about whether or not a solution is to cut back on roll carts, even for those people who want them.”

Department of Fish and Game Regional Supervisor Larry Van Daele chimed in on the matter and said the population of bears has been growing in Kodiak, but even more so, Kodiak residents' attitudes toward bears have changed.

"I first came to Kodiak about 30 years ago myself and you know the idea back then as a lot of us remember is if the bear showed its nose around town, it'd be dead pretty quick. If it's brown it's down. People weren't tolerant of bears. And prior to the 1970s we would actively kill bears in Fish and Game for ranchers and so forth. The reason that doesn't happen now is because society has changed. People who own the animals, we're stewards of this resource, you know we're the technical advisors, people have told us time and again that we want to be able to live with bears. We want to show that we can live with bears."

Assemblywoman Chris Lynch said she hopes everyone stays diligent in working to solve the bear problem in Kodiak, which she added isn't a new one.

"I can tell you in 1998 we were having problems with bears and we did not have roll carts and we were constantly moving dumpsters and while I believe it's amplified with social media these days, there's always been a bear problem."

In general, most agreed that continued educational outreach and community involvement will help keep the bears relatively at bay. The Kodiak Unified Bear Subcommittee, or kubs, is a group of various community entities that work to help solve the issue of bears around town. That group will be meeting more frequently in the coming weeks to help deal with bear-related problems as they arise.