

COMMENTARY

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City folk must start talking trash right now

About six months into his second term, Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra and the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) can boast an encouraging report card from city residents — they gave him an average score of 3.27 out of 4.00, according to a Dhurakit Pundit University poll.

The poll caught my attention because it showed that the respondents — 10,182 in total — are fairly honest and realistic.

Wait, I'm not talking about the "highly satisfactory" marks — after all, it was the BMA that commissioned the poll.

What makes me think the respondents are realistic is their list of priorities for problems they want the BMA to address: they placed waste, not traffic — that disastrous condition that has altered Bangkok from the City of Angels into something else — at the top of the list.

After all, these respondents must realise that by itself, the BMA is not capable of solving traffic woes. It's a problem that requires united efforts from various agencies — from national to local, from policy to operational levels.

But waste is different. It's the BMA's sole responsibility to keep the city clean and, as the poll indicates, the respondents want the agency to do more.

While the respondents and/or city

residents feel they have the right to call for more efficiency in waste management, I only partly agree with them.

Because instead of complaining and making demands, city residents must be more realistic and take a more active approach to minimising waste.

We don't have to be scientists to realise that our waste management capacity cannot handle the volume of rubbish we produce.

They should know that it's not possible to leave the issue solely in the BMA's hands given the enormous volume of garbage being discarded in the city each day — 9,800 tonnes, or more than 3.5 million tonnes a year as of 2010.

That amount is now most likely much higher, and we don't have to be scientists to realise that our waste management capacity cannot handle the volume of rubbish we produce. Plastic bags alone are a major headache.

I think it's high time the BMA readjusts the way it performs. Instead of focusing too much on physical work like waste collection and disposal (and taking pride in the design of its bins), it must invest more time and effort in building public awareness about efficient waste disposal and encourage recycling and waste reduction — a process that must begin at home with garbage sorting.

Ironically, those who are environmentally aware have complained that the city's garbage collectors have undermined their efforts to sort their own

waste, as all the sorted rubbish is simply lumped back together during the collecting process.

In fact, Bangkok is in a better position than some other cities given the activeness of *saleng*, or scavengers, who over the past two decades have played a role in waste management, filling the gap left by city garbage collectors as they turn trash into treasure.

What is needed, as I said earlier, is efficient waste sorting in each household, while the BMA explores more possibilities to provide support to these *saleng*.

The fact that the BMA is occupied so heavily with conventional waste significantly hinders the agency's efforts to tackle other important issues — namely hazardous and electronic waste.

For more than two decades, the management of toxic and electronic waste has existed only in policy papers. So many of MR Sukhumbhand's predecessors — from Bhichit Rattakul to Apirak Kosayodhin — talked about it, but nothing concrete was done.

To begin with, people need to be made aware of the dangers of this form of waste, and must be given suitable places at which to discard it.

This waste, which includes batteries and light bulbs, is tiny in size but enormous in terms of impact. It is an environmental timebomb. We cannot afford to wait and deal with the problem in a business-as-usual way.

I hope in the next opinion poll, respondents will remind the BMA of this issue. MR Sukhumbhand needs to know he must act now.

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