

Debris Haulers' Windfall: Odd Math Jacks Up Sandy Tab

BY SHAWN BOBURG
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HACKENSACK, N.J. — After Superstorm Sandy struck, mountains of rubble were collected and taken to temporary storage sites. In Ocean County, N.J., those locations included a parking lot in Ortley Beach, a ball field in Bay Head, a recycling center in Berkeley. From there, trucks hauled it all to the county landfill in Manchester.

The distances of those trips varied. But on bills submitted by the debris removal firm, they had something in common: They were all recorded as being just over or, in some cases, exactly 16 miles.

Coincidence? Doubtful. Under the state's contract with the cleanup firm, AshBritt Inc., 16 miles is a key distance — it's when the cost of the haul goes up by 30 percent. In Ocean County alone, the additional, and potentially unwarranted, payouts totaled more than \$500,000.

The Record found hundreds of instances in which truckers working under AshBritt claimed the higher mileage, even though the most direct route from debris sites to the landfill weigh station — as measured by Google Maps and The Record's own driving of the routes — was less than 16 miles.

The analysis raises questions about whether the provision in the AshBritt contract creates an incentive to extend, or overstate, the length of a trip, something federal officials have said led to overcharges for debris removal after previous disasters, including Hurricane Katrina. And it calls into question the methods of independent monitoring firms that were hired to prevent fraud and overcharges during the massive Sandy cleanup effort.

One of those monitoring firms said last week that it was investigating a mileage "anomaly" identified by *The Record*.

The haul to the landfill was the final step in a process that saw millions of cubic yards of storm debris carted from littered streets to local storage sites, where it was processed, then loaded into trucks bound for a dump or recycling center. Monitors were hired to watch over each stage.

It was during this last phase where the extra payments took place. Whether AshBritt, the companies working under it as subcontractors or the truckers themselves had influence over the mileage calculations is unclear. What is clear is that the three firms that were hired as monitors in Ocean County recorded them as accurate.

Complicating the issue is the fact that the monitoring firms appear to have used slightly different methods for calculating distance.

One firm, Arcadis, said it considered a weigh station less than a mile inside the Ocean County Landfill — the same spot used in *The Record's* analysis — to be the official endpoint of hauls to that location. Another, the Louis Berger Group, said it gave drivers credit for mileage they drove inside the landfill, after that point. AshBritt's contract with the state does not define the trip endpoint.

"We get paid off their calcula-



Debris from Hurricane Sandy was hauled from temporary holding points to places like the Berkely, New Jersey, recycling center. Billing to the state for many of the hauls were right at, or just over 16 miles -- a mile point where costs increase by 30 percent -- when investigations have found the most direct route being shorter than that distance.

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tion," an AshBritt spokesman, Jared Moskowitz, said of the monitors. "If you challenge the calculations, go challenge them."

Drivers could take whatever route they wanted, Moskowitz said, "but the shortest drivable distance between the loading point to the offload point is the mileage."

In the hours after Sandy struck, the Christie administration awarded the emergency cleanup job to AshBritt, which hired dozens of subcontractors, including one owned by AshBritt's chief executive, to do the bulk of the cleanup work. Opting for speed, New Jersey adopted a contract the firm had already negotiated with Connecticut, which included tiered pricing for hauling.

Under the deal, rates for the entire load increased from \$31.25 to \$40.63 per ton at 16 miles, and they rose to \$53.13 at 31 miles. The typical truck carried 20 to 25 tons of debris to the landfill.

In the weeks after Sandy, New Jersey also agreed to a standing debris-removal contract with AshBritt and three other companies that includes the tiered pricing. The deals were for one year. Moskowitz said the pricing is "standard in all contracts throughout the industry around the country."

He referred all further questions to the monitoring companies.

Arcadis, one of three monitoring firms hired in Ocean County, used software and global satellite positioning systems to calculate the shortest driving route between the temporary storage sites where the hauls originated and the Ocean County Landfill in Manchester, where most debris from the county's hardest-hit communities was taken.

But *The Record* found examples where the claimed distance between a site in Bay Head and the landfill was more than 3 miles farther than the shortest route. The distance claimed for billing purposes on about 90

trips was exactly 16 miles. Google Maps, the program Arcadis said it used, indicates the most direct route is 12.9 miles.

Arcadis officials said they are investigating the discrepancy. *The Record* reviewed hundreds of pages of documents, including bills that showed the starting and ending points for trips in Ocean County during the two months after the Oct. 29 storm. The newspaper determined the distance of the most direct routes by using online mapping services, such as Google Maps. A reporter then drove and measured those routes, which included county and state highways that local officials said were open to debris removal trucks during the cleanup.

The federal government found excessive mileage claims after Katrina.

Citing audits by federal agencies, U.S. Rep. Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif., wrote in a memo to the Committee on Government Reform in 2006 that Katrina contractors "took advantage of a system that paid them an extra \$2 per cubic yard for debris carried over 15 miles. In one instance, 'mileage was overstated' in 50 percent of the 303 trips examined by auditors." It does not identify the contractor. AshBritt was one of many firms that participated in the Katrina cleanup.

And a 2011 report by the inspector general of the Department of Homeland Security that focused on FEMA's oversight of debris removal after federally declared disasters also noted reports of drivers "putting on unnecessary miles, and even driving in circles" to maximize payouts.

The method Arcadis, the monitoring firm, said it used in New Jersey was designed to prevent such fraud.

Monitors stationed at the pickup site and at the landfill used hand-held GPS devices that mark the latitude and longitude

of the starting and ending points of each haul, said the company's public relations manager, Debra Havins. "Regardless of the route a driver might take, the shortest driving route calculated by the system is the basis for payment recommendation to our clients," she wrote in an email.

If roads are impassable or drivers are directed away from certain routes by local officials, truckers may "ask for a modification to the 'Google Miles' determination," Havins wrote. "However, at no time were we asked to make such a modification. In other words the mileage documented ... are all the shortest routes from point A to point B."

In many cases, however, the records indicate otherwise.

Arcadis documents show that, from Nov. 25 through Nov. 30, several trucks picked up debris at Brick Beach 1, one of three beaches owned by Brick on the barrier island, and hauled it to the Ocean County Landfill. The documents include coordinates that show the exact location of the pickup within the parking lot, precise enough to distinguish between parking spaces. Havins said the "static" endpoint used for calculating trip distance to the Ocean County Landfill was a weigh station, which is on a private road a little less than a mile inside the entrance gates.

The Arcadis records show that all those trips from Brick Beach 1 to Ocean County Landfill were recorded as exactly 16.20 miles. But the Google Maps distance is 14.2 miles, and a reporter clocked 14.7 miles between the beach parking lot and the landfill weigh station.

The difference is only about \$235 for a truck carrying 25 tons of debris. But over the course of two months, the extra charges added up to \$512,000 for the towns that paid for trips longer than the most direct route. Those towns were Toms River, Seaside Heights, Long Beach,

Mantoloking, Berkeley, Brick, Long Beach and Bay Head. Mantoloking used sites in Bay Head and Brick to store its debris.

Ocean County is paying the AshBritt bills on behalf of its towns but will ask the Federal Emergency Management Agency to reimburse it for at least 75 percent of the costs. Towns will have to reimburse the county for the remainder.

The Arcadis records identify each truck by placard number and include the name of the employee monitoring the operation.

Arcadis monitored debris removal in Brick and Bay Head, two of the five towns that were charged the higher rates. Louis Berger Group and True North monitored the other towns: Berkeley, Seaside Heights and Toms River.

A Louis Berger Group spokeswoman said her firm also used Google Maps to verify the shortest distance between the locations, but monitors also recorded odometer readings after the trucks entered the landfill and credited them for the distance they drove until they reached the exact location where they dumped the debris. For instance, she said, if a truck had to drive to the top of a heap to dump its load, it was credited for the distance.

The analysis also found hauls to and from the same locations that were charged at different rates. In December, about 90 trips from Bay Head's temporary debris site, on a ball field off Metcalfe Street and Club Drive, were billed at exactly 16 miles. An additional 55 that same month were between 15.3 and 15.9 miles, according to documents submitted by Arcadis. For a truck hauling 25 tons, that small distance meant the difference between getting \$1,015 or \$781 for a single trip.

Pickup and drop-off coordinates were not included in the billing records for towns that did not use Arcadis. But the records, obtained from Ocean County,

made clear that those towns were either not billed based on the most direct path or were charged more because trucks drove a few miles after they had already entered the landfill.

The shortest path from the small fenced-in lot at the Berkeley Recycling Center on Pinewald Keswick Road to the Ocean County Landfill weigh station is about 14.7 miles, according to a reporter's measure. But more than 1,170 tons hauled between those points was charged at the higher rate for a total cost of more than \$47,000, about \$11,000 beyond what it would have cost at the lower rate.

"We didn't pick the routes," said Steven J. Seiler, the manager of the town's Department of Public Works. "Our subcontractors, they pick their own routes."

He said he believed the distance to the dump was 16 miles, and he said drivers took the Garden State Parkway to U.S. Route 9 north to Route 70 west. By taking Route 9, and bypassing Ocean County Route 527 in Toms River, the trucks were extending their trip beyond 16 miles.

Cpl. Tom Leach of the Toms River police said there are no restrictions for trucks on Route 527 and that it is a common route for heavy vehicles traveling north to the county dump. Told that Sandy debris trucks took U.S. 9 instead, he said, "That's a longer route."

Lou Amoruso, the public works director in Toms River, said he believed any trips originating on the barrier island would be more than 16 miles. But Google Maps showed hauls to the landfill weigh station from a site in Ortley Beach and two storage areas in Seaside Heights were within a 16-mile drive.

"The idea was to get the most direct, shortest route to the landfill," Amoruso said. A reporter notched 15.6 miles from the Ortley Beach site to the landfill station by driving this route: south on Route 35 to Route 37 west, north on County Route 166 and then west on County Route 527 to Route 70 east.

The two main bridges off the barrier island, Route 37 and the Mantoloking Bridge, were open to debris haulers during the cleanup, local officials said.

Scott Pazzarras, Brick's DPW director, said Arcadis, the monitoring firm, "didn't run the mileage by us."

He believed debris haulers coming from the storage site at Brick Beach 1 would have taken the Mantoloking Bridge to Cedarbridge Road to Route 70 west. That route is 14.7 miles. Brick was charged for more than 16 miles, which added more than \$80,000 to the cost.

Detectives Study Knives In California Girl's Stabbing

VALLEY SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Investigators searching for evidence in the stabbing death of an 8-year-old girl were looking Friday at several knives taken from her home to determine if one could have inflicted the fatal wounds.

Sgt. Chris Hewitt of the Calaveras County Sheriff's Office said investigators had taken "several knives from the home," but he would say little else about them.

"We don't want to put too many details out there that could taint our interviews," Hewitt said.

Victim Leila Fowler shared the home with her father, stepmother, 12-year-old brother and two older siblings. Family members are being questioned at this point only as witnesses, he said.

The 12-year-old discovered Fowler's body a week ago while the parents were at a Little League game. He said he saw the assailant and described him as being tall with long gray hair.

A witness who said she also saw the man flee has since recanted and is no longer credible, Hewitt said.

"It's a mystery. She never gave any indication she recanted because she was in fear of her safety," he said.

Hewitt said that while meeting with a sketch artist and detectives Wednesday, the unidentified witness, who was reported to be a neighbor, refused to provide a description so a composite sketch could be made of the man.

Her account had been consid-

ered significant to identifying Leila's killer because her earlier descriptions had matched the one provided by the brother. The witness, however, reported seeing the suspect headed in the opposite direction than the brother had reported.

"Though this may seem like a setback in the investigation, it is actually a positive result in that it allows the investigators to narrow the scope of their investigation," Hewitt said of the witness' statements turning out to be unreliable.

FBI agents are now assisting with the investigation. They said they hope the brother's description of the assailant will provide more leads.

"This investigation is hour by hour, day by day. We could get a huge break. We just don't know," Hewitt said.

Investigators have found no link between the attempted kidnapping of a 15-month-old girl in Placerville on Tuesday and Leila's slaying Saturday in her home in Valley Springs, about 50 miles away.

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