



A Fleet Buyer's Guide to Garbage Truck Bodies

Choosing the Right Refuse Truck

A practical guide for municipal fleets, sanitation departments, and waste companies choosing the right truck body for the job.

Choosing the Right Refuse Truck Body

If you're running a municipal fleet, a sanitation department, or a private waste company, you already know this: the truck body you choose can make or break your day. It is, hands down, the best and most important piece of equipment that you'll purchase.

The wrong choice shows up fast. Crews fall behind, routes drag on, overtime creeps up, and maintenance starts to eat your budget. The right match quietly does its job without failing. Routes finish on time, crews go home safe, and your trucks spend more time on the road than in the shop.



This ebook walks through the three most common refuse truck body styles:



Side Loaders



Front Loaders



Rear Loaders

Why Body Choice Matters More Than You Think

It's easy to treat a refuse truck body like just another item for your business but little things are big things. The body design impacts almost everything about how your routes run and whether they are as effective as they should be.

Labor

Side loaders can often run with a single operator, but rear loaders typically need two or three operators, so this saves money when it comes to labor.

Safety

Automated side loaders keep operators inside most of the time. This is a huge safety feature because it can reduce exposure to traffic and strain injuries.

Productivity

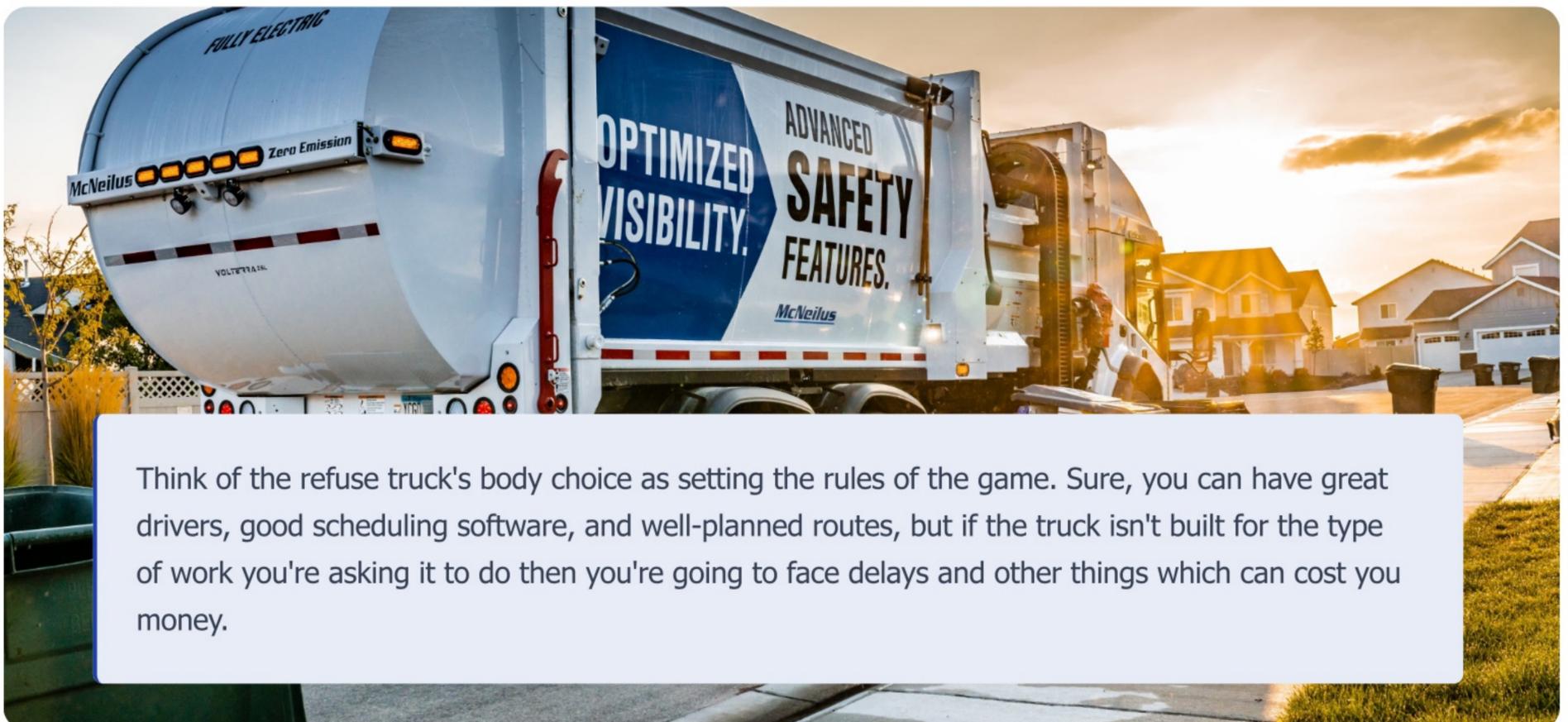
Compactor bodies can pack more waste per load, which reduces the number of landfill runs and fuel use.

Route Flexibility

Rear loaders are famous for being "take-all" trucks, while front and side loaders shine when routes and containers are standardized.

Maintenance

More moving parts can mean higher maintenance needs, but also mean higher productivity when things are working well which saves you money.



Think of the refuse truck's body choice as setting the rules of the game. Sure, you can have great drivers, good scheduling software, and well-planned routes, but if the truck isn't built for the type of work you're asking it to do then you're going to face delays and other things which can cost you money.

Start with Your Routes, Not the Brochure

Before you think about spec sheets, it helps to take a hard look at what your trucks actually do on a daily basis.

📍 Ask yourself the following questions:

Are your routes mostly residential, commercial, or mixed?

How dense are your stops?

Do you deal with narrow streets, cul-de-sacs, or alleys?

Are your containers standardized?

How often are trucks maxed on volume vs weight?

What are your biggest headaches right now?



Residential routes

- Dense stops
- Standardized carts
- Tight streets

Commercial routes

- Larger containers
- Scheduled pickups
- Can't afford missed service

Mixed/urban routes

- Small carts and bulk items
- Alleys and parked cars
- Heavy congestion

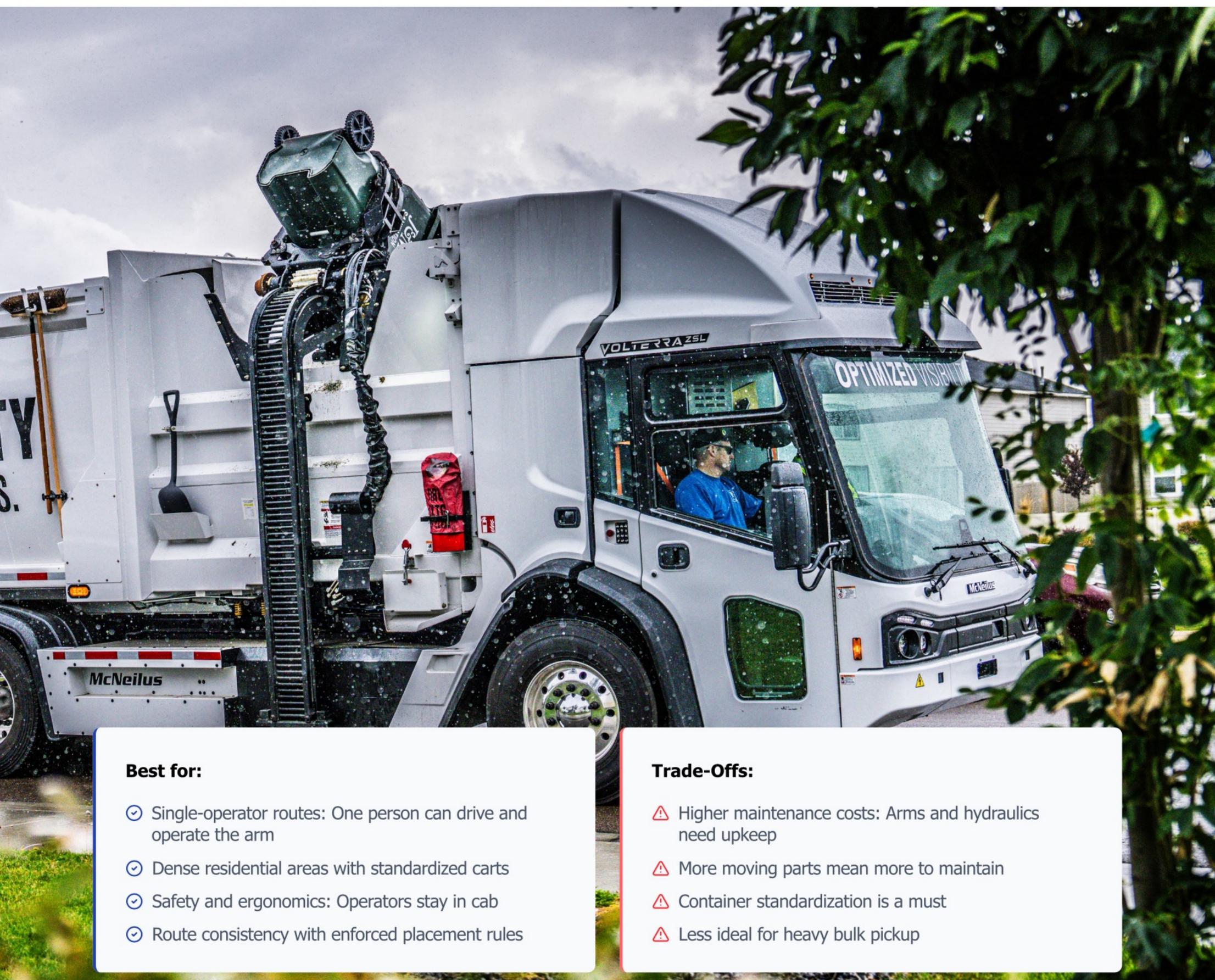
Front, side, and rear loaders each function best in different environments. When you understand your routes then it becomes much easier to see which body type will give you the least headaches.

Side Loaders: The Efficiency Champion

Side loaders have become a favorite for many residential waste management operations, especially as labor has gotten tighter.

What is a side loader?

Side loaders are loaded from the side, either manually or with a robotic arm that grabs standardized carts, tips them into a hopper, and sets them back on the curb. Most modern versions are automated and allow the driver to control the arm from inside the cab.



Best for:

- ✓ Single-operator routes: One person can drive and operate the arm
- ✓ Dense residential areas with standardized carts
- ✓ Safety and ergonomics: Operators stay in cab
- ✓ Route consistency with enforced placement rules

Trade-Offs:

- ⚠ Higher maintenance costs: Arms and hydraulics need upkeep
- ⚠ More moving parts mean more to maintain
- ⚠ Container standardization is a must
- ⚠ Less ideal for heavy bulk pickup

Front Loaders: The Commercial Workhorse

Front loaders are the classic commercial refuse truck. When you picture a truck lifting a big dumpster over the cab and dumping it into the top, that's a front loader. They are favored for a multitude of reasons.



What is a front loader?

Front loaders use powered forks on the front of the truck to engage sleeves on large commercial containers. The truck then lifts the container over the cab and dumps it into a top-mounted hopper. At that point, hydraulics compact the load toward the rear to make room for the next load.

Best for:

- ✓ Commercial and industrial routes
- ✓ Predictable stops: Same containers, same locations
- ✓ High compaction and capacity
- ✓ Drive-by efficiency with minimal ground time

Trade-Offs:

- ⚠ Route limitations: Not ideal for narrow residential areas
- ⚠ Need overhead and front clearance at each stop
- ⚠ Requires compatible commercial containers with sleeves
- ⚠ Less flexible for unpredictable waste

If your operation handles a lot of commercial customers with consistent container sizes and pickup locations then front loaders can be extremely efficient. Many fleets pair them with rear loaders or side loaders to cover mixed commercial/residential markets.

Rear Loaders: The Take-All Utility Player



What is a rear loader?

Large hopper at the back where workers toss bags, empty carts, or use a lift. A packing mechanism compacts the load.

✓ Best for:

Mixed routes

Both residential bags and small commercial

"Take-all" capability

Bulky items, odd shapes, loose material

⚠ Trade-Offs:

More manual labor

Crews walk behind truck

Larger crews needed

Often two or three people

"Rear loaders are often the utility infielder of a fleet – maybe not glamorous, but invaluable when the route or waste stream is messy."



Total Cost of Ownership

Looking beyond the sticker price



Crew Size & Labor

Side loaders: 1 operator. Rear loaders: 2-3 crew members



Fuel & Landfill

Compaction reduces trips. Half-full trucks cost more



TCO



Maintenance

Automated: Complex. Rear: Simpler, heavy wear. Parts matter



Resale Value

Right body on right route ages better. Popular configs resell easier

| Safety, Ergonomics, and Regulations



Side Loaders

Reduce time on feet but need awareness of arm movement

Front Loaders

Keep operator in cab, require visibility training

Rear Loaders

Work on ground with greater risk of strains



Ergonomics & Retention

Automation reduces injuries and makes jobs more attractive. Experienced drivers stay longer in less physically demanding roles.



Compliance

Safety standards, container placement rules, and automation requirements vary by region. Your truck choice affects compliance.

Safety configurations that keep people out of harm's way pay off over the life of the truck.



Future-Proofing Your Fleet

Waste collection is changing. Choose trucks that can adapt to tomorrow's demands.



Automation

- Cameras & sensors
- In-cab diagnostics
- Route telematics



Environmental

- Cut emissions per trip
- Better separation
- Reduced idling



Flexibility

- Routes will change
- Customers shift
- Demands evolve

Plan for these scenarios:



Routes double in size over time



Lose a big commercial customer



Cities mandate automation

FLEET MANAGEMENT GUIDE

Putting It All Together

Your quick decision guide



Side Loader

Choose when...

- ⊙ Dense residential with standardized carts
- ⊙ Labor is tight, single-operator routes
- ⊙ Safety is a top priority



Front Loader

Choose when...

- ⊙ Primarily commercial/industrial routes
- ⊙ Large dumpsters, predictable schedules
- ⊙ High compaction efficiency needed



Rear Loader

Choose when...

- ⊙ Routes are mixed or unpredictable
- ⊙ Need "take-all" for bulk items
- ⊙ Want versatile backup truck

The winning formula:



Keep crews safe



Match your routes



Fit long-term budget



Room for growth

You need trucks that quietly knock out routes every day, keep your people safe, and protect your budget.

