

GIVING CITY AUSTIN

Nonprofits oppose city's new recycling program

Leaders say donations to Goodwill, Salvation Army could be cut.

By Monica Williams Giving City Austin

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This article is published through a partnership with Giving City Austin, which reports on the area's nonprofit community. Read more Giving City stories at GivingCityAustin.com.

Charitable organizations are urging the city of Austin to cancel a new program that recycles clothing and household goods, saying the program encourages residents to place unwanted items at the curb rather than donate them.

The recycling program started Dec. 5 and is operated by the for-profit, Ohio-based company Simple Recycling. It allows 200,000 Austin residents to place unwanted items in recycling bags and place them on the curb for pickup on regularly scheduled days, instead of throwing them in the trash. Simple Recycling pays the city \$20 per collected ton, then sells the goods to thrift markets in Houston and beyond.

Austin nonprofit leaders say the arrangement could cut into the donations of clothing and household goods that organizations such as Goodwill of Central Texas and the Salvation Army Austin use to fund a variety of services for Central Texans.

“Not only does this contract with Simple Recycling undermine local charitable organizations by reducing donations,” said Jan Gunter, deputy development director of the Salvation Army Austin, “but more importantly it will directly reduce charitable services that are available and critical to the Austin residents.”

Gunter said Salvation Army’s four retail stores fund its local adult rehabilitation center.

The city department that oversees the contract, Austin Resource Recovery, said it didn’t inform nonprofit organizations like Goodwill and Salvation Army explicitly when the contract was signed in June or when the program launched in December.

Natalie Betts, Austin Resource Recovery’s recycling economic development program manager, said the program was created to help the city work towards its Zero Waste goal by 2040. According to a 2015 study, 2.9 percent of what Austinites throw out is textiles.

In contracting with Simple Recycling, Austin Resource Recovery said it went through the standard solicitation process appropriate for a contract of that size, including inviting nonprofits like Goodwill to bid on the procurement. But once the final round of candidates was determined, Austin Resource Recovery said it no longer communicated to local nonprofits or any of the nonwinning bidders about the program. And the size of the contract meant it didn’t warrant action by the City Council.

Betts said the program has been in the works for years, and, “initial discussions did include some input from reuse community. So that wasn’t something that was considered. At this point we’d sort of assumed that these conversations had already happened. We’re seeing what we can do to address those concerns now.”

Traci Berry, Goodwill Central Texas senior vice president of community engagement and education, said it didn’t bid on the project because of a provision in the request for proposal that said, “Austin Resource Recovery seeks a Contractor to provide a curbside textile recycling program that will not compete with charitable clothing donation centers.”

"It wouldn't have mattered who bid on it, it would have hurt Salvation Army, Easter Seals, Goodwill," said Berry, "Anybody doing this is going to hurt these organizations."

In acknowledgment of their concerns, Austin Resource Recovery met Dec. 14 with a number of the nonprofit organizations. Berry said most of the nonprofits in attendance wanted the city to cancel the contract.

"I don't think they realized how big of a deal this would be," she said. "You could tell they were not prepared for how troubled everyone was. But they handled it really well."

Adam Winfield, president of Simple Recycling, said that, based on the company's experience in other cities, residents who choose to donate their goods will continue to do so even with the recycling program available. "We also make a concerted effort to not use the word 'donate' in our language," he said, "to make sure there's no misunderstanding by residents."

Betts said that Austin Resource Recovery reminds customers to donate their clothing and household goods first, if possible.