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Austin's curbside clothing pickup service faces cancellation

By Kevin Schwaller

UPDATED January 25, 2017, 4:33 am

AUSTIN (KXAN) — Austin city council is scheduled to vote Thursday on whether to cancel their contract with Simple Recycling for curbside pickup of unwanted clothes and other goods.

The contract comes at no cost to the city and is meant to keep clothes out of the landfill. Currently, Simple Recycling is selling the clothes it collects to for-profit thrift stores in the Houston-area, according to a city memo.

“Here you have not for profits collecting donations, investing in the communities and the alternative that the city chose is to contract with an Ohio-based company,” said Traci Berry, with Goodwill of Central Texas. “Goodwill does support cancellation of the contract.”

The memo also states that if the city does away with the green bags, Austin might have to cover the costs for laying off the recently hired drivers. The city might also have to pay for the costs to send out mailers and the expenses for the company having to break its lease.

“We don't want the material that residents are donating to non-profits,” said Adam Winfield, founder and president of Simple Recycling. “Continue to do that. It's the 6.5 million pounds that are going into a landfill that a solution needs to be provided.”

Founder of Simple Recycling Adam Winfield says his company is with the trash, not non-profits. He says that's been the case in other cities where Simple Recycling operates. Winfield says canceling his company's biggest contract could put Simple Recycling out of business.

“To have the conversation be: ‘lets cancel the contract and then figure it out’ is terrifying to me,” said Winfield. Charities such as Goodwill want a chance to work with the city to offer a solution other than Simple Recycling.

Simple Recycling founder says the company has already collected about 100 tons of clothing and other goods since it began in December. Winfield says the company is selling clothes in Houston because that is where it has existing partnerships. He says it is a purely economic decision and his goal is to keep the clothes as local as possible.

Goodwill also has suggestions if the contract gets canceled. They propose letting non-profits hire drivers who would lose their jobs if the program is eliminated. Goodwill estimates it receives about 17,500 tons of clothing each year.

City staff recommends keeping the contract, encouraging Simple Recycling to create local partnerships, continuing to monitor the impact on the non-profit community and report back in six to 12 months.