

# AUSTIN MONITOR

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## Simple Recycling, complicated problem

City Council members will have to decide today whether to cancel a contract with Simple Recycling, a small business that invested a significant amount of money and hired employees to bring a new recycling service to the city. If they do not cancel the contract, several nonprofits say, curbside recycling will damage their businesses and their ability to provide services to the needy.

Austin Resource Recovery put out a request for proposals last year and Simple Recycling won the bid. The city department estimates that 6.6 million pounds of clothing are put into Austin's trash each year. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, only 15 percent of unwanted clothing is donated to charitable organizations, while 85 percent goes into landfills.



ARR was trying to deal with that problem and saw a chance to make some money, too. Under the contract, the company began curbside pickup of textiles and other clothing in December. But it faced a backlash from groups like Goodwill and the Salvation Army, who asked Council to cancel the contract at last week's meeting.

If it does cancel, company owner Adam Winfield says, it will bankrupt not only his company but him personally. He was at City Hall yesterday meeting with Council members and trying to save his business.

The matter did not come to Council before the contract was awarded because it generates income for the city rather than costing the city money.

Traci Berri of Goodwill of Central Texas told Council that her organization had seen a 1.5 percent drop in donations since December. Goodwill believes that that is attributable to Simple Recycling.

But Andrew Dobbs of the Texas Campaign for the Environment told Council, "The bottom line ... is that we've got a great zero-waste business here that's contracting in good faith with the city. We cannot drive these people out of business. We cannot harm their business because these

are the people that we need for the future. We also can't harm these nonprofits, so let's work together to find a solution that benefits everybody."

After hearing from supporters and opponents of the program, Council opted to postpone, with several Council members expressing hope that Simple Recycling, Austin Resource Recovery and the nonprofits could reach a resolution satisfactory to all.

Council Member Ellen Troxclair, the lead sponsor of the resolution to cancel the contract, told the *Austin Monitor* on Wednesday that she was "still hoping to work something out." However, she made it clear that she would side with the nonprofits if she had to choose one over the other.

"The value of our nonprofits to the community is significant," Troxclair said. "Really, this is an example of a breakdown in process with city staff, but ultimately this wasn't a contract or program that was approved by the City Council, and it's our responsibility to do what's right for the city as a whole."

Troxclair said she had received complaints from a significant number of her constituents. She also pointed out that if the city does vote to cancel the contract, there is a 45-day period before services would end.

"So maybe something could be worked out during that time," she said. "But when you come into a city and unbeknownst to you, you are doing something that is a significant damage" to nonprofits such as Goodwill, the Salvation Army and the Assistance League, "it's something you have to be responsive to."

Mayor Pro Tem Kathie Tovo told the *Monitor* that she shops at thrift stores after dropping off donations. "After last Thursday's session and hearing from different nonprofit providers about how it already in their opinion and their data impacted their ability to collect items for resale, I'm very concerned. I have been concerned about the contract since I learned about it back in December."

She added that Council would have to talk to the owner about the impact that canceling the contract would have on his business.