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## Austin's battle over textile donations reaches a six-month compromise

### City Council to analyze impact of Simple Recycling's new curbside textile program on local nonprofits

By Christopher Neely | Posted Feb. 3, 2017Feb 4, 2017 at 2:56 pm

A curbside textile pickup program intended to help divert millions of tons of recyclable textiles away from the landfill has caused panic among the city's nonprofit organizations.



Simple Recycling launched its program in December. The for-profit organization encourages households in Austin to think twice before trashing clothes by asking residents to instead throw the textiles in the provided plastic green bags, leave them curbside and allow Simple Recycling take care of the rest.

The program—which, according to numbers laid out at Thursday's Austin City Council meeting, saw just over 4,000 residents participate in January—is encouraging for Austin, which has a Zero Waste by 2040 plan. However, for local nonprofit organizations such as Goodwill and the Salvation Army, the convenience of the program strikes a chord of anxiety to the tune of their donation centers becoming obsolete.

## A battle for donations

On Thursday, Austin City Council deliberated over a resolution, sponsored by District 8 Council Member Ellen Troxclair, to cancel the contract with Simple Recycling in order to protect the nonprofits. The deliberation ended with a compromise: Simple Recycling's program will operate for at least another six months, during which the city will collect data on the items that are being collected, the amount of overlap with nonprofits and the impact the new program is having on the organizations.

The council has the power to pull the program early if the impact becomes too harsh.

Andrew Winfield, owner of the Ohio-based Simple Recycling, has expressed support for the mission of the local nonprofit organizations. He said he understands the "fear" of organizations like Goodwill and the Salvation Army but says at this point, it is only an anxiety and not based on any data or experience. On Thursday he provided a five-year analysis on the state of similar organizations in cities where Simple Recycling was operating; the data showed the nonprofits' annual revenues thriving.

Austin has a strong reuse culture, reflected by its aggressive Zero Waste by 2040 plan, which aims to keep 90 percent of discarded materials out of the landfill. Textiles are a major part of that battle. Because of nonprofit donation centers in the city, 81 percent of textiles discarded by Austinites are donated, according to a city of Austin Diversion Report from 2015. It's that 19 percent—3,300 tons per year—that Winfield said he is focused on.

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—Andrew Winfield, owner of Simple Recycling

"The intention and the result that we found in our experience is that this material that we're collecting is coming out of the waste stream and not the donation stream," Winfield said. "We are not here to negatively impact the charitable organizations. This is the first time we've ever had such an outcry from these kinds of organizations."

As a measure of compromise, Winfield said he would help advertise the nonprofits' services and even offered to help them devise a strategy for the organizations to start their own curbside program for multifamily housing complexes, a demographic of Austin that Simple Recycling does not serve.

However, when the nonprofits and Simple Recycling met for a stakeholder meeting on Tuesday, the conclusion was that the nonprofits simply wanted Simple Recycling out of town.

"We respectfully support the cancellation of the contract," said Traci Berry, vice president of community engagement and education with Goodwill Central Texas, on Thursday.

## Convenience is king

Berry said Simple Recycling has a key advantage in the convenience of its service. She said market research shows convenience is the greatest indicator when measuring people's willingness to give. Goodwill's strategy is based off this model of convenience, Berry said.

Since 2010, the organization has opened 13 stores in the community to be more convenient, which has substantially increased donations and generated more than \$97 million. The money collected through Goodwill and similar organizations, Berry said, goes back into the community through various programs such as the establishment of the state's only adult high school, the creation of over 7,000 jobs, adult rehabilitation and removal of recyclable goods from the landfill.

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—Traci Berry, vice president of community engagement and education with Goodwill Central Texas "But with one fell swoop, without decades of investment, this contract with an out-of-state company is taking goods out of our community, money out of our community and they have the competitive advantage because they are now the most convenient," Berry said to the council Thursday.

The nonprofits also take issue with Simple Recycling's for-profit business model. Simple Recycling picks up the donation bags and brings them to companies they've partnered with that purchase the reusable items for resale. These partnerships aren't with companies in Austin and lead the materials to end up in communities such as Houston or out of state in Ohio.

Berry said Goodwill's donations in Austin fell by 13,000 for December and January, but saw a 6 percent growth in areas right outside of the city. She concluded the only difference was the presence of Simple Recycling. Winfield challenged this, explaining that since his company only had 4,000 customers in January, there had to be another factor in the decline.

## City's contract negotiation draws concern

One of the other main issues the nonprofits have with the contract, besides the fear of a downturn in donations, is that the city's waste management service, Austin Resource Recovery—which bid out and negotiated the contract—did not engage with stakeholders during the process. ARR Deputy Director Sam Angoori confirmed this on Thursday.

Andrew Dobbs, a representative from the Texas Campaign for the Environment, said his organization could not support the cancellation of a recycling program in a city like Austin. The environmental benefits were undeniable. However, he said the situation could have been handled more cleanly.

"We have another situation where big decisions are being made by staff, and stakeholders are not being informed," Dobbs said to council last week. "They needed to be contacted, and they needed to be informed."