

# AUSTIN MONITOR

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## CITY COUNCIL

### Curbside textile recycling continues – for now

In the wake of protests from nonprofits including the Salvation Army, Goodwill and the Assistance League of Austin about the impact curbside recycling of textiles is having on their businesses, City Council on Thursday directed Interim City Manager Elaine Hart to come back to the dais within 30 days with ideas on how the city might partner with the nonprofits to increase donations.

Council also directed Austin Resource Recovery to gather information on the impact curbside recycling is having on nonprofits.

The contract with Simple Recycling, the company that started offering curbside recycling of textiles to Austin residents in December, will continue for the next six months unless there is evidence before then that the nonprofits are suffering as a result of the contract.

As part of the city's Zero Waste Strategic Plan, ARR contracted with Simple Recycling to pick up and recycle textiles over the next three years.

The contract provides that Simple Recycling will pay the city for an estimated 6.6 million pounds of materials it collects each year. The contract did not go through Council because it generates less than \$58,000 in revenue per year.

After hearing from nonprofits that claimed their businesses were being hurt by the curbside recycling, Council Member Ellen Troxclair wrote the original resolution to cancel the Simple Recycling contract. But by Thursday she had changed her proposal to allow the contract to continue for six months while the city collects data.

Traci Berry of Goodwill told Council on Thursday that the nonprofits could expand their services and take over the lease and employees of Simple Recycling if given the opportunity.

Council Member Ann Kitchen, who penned the amendment directing the city manager to work with the nonprofits, told the *Austin Monitor* that her idea was to "follow up in a way on what



Goodwill had testified about – about their willingness to take certain actions,” without specifying which actions those might be.

In addition, Council directed staff to assist nonprofits right away in advertising their services.

Kitchen said, “We recognize that we have a goal as a city to reduce waste, but we also have a clear policy to not harm our nonprofits. ... So what we have on the table right now doesn’t” harm those agencies, “as far as we know, because we don’t have the data.”

Berry also said that Goodwill had received 13,000 fewer donations during January and blamed it on Simple Recycling.

However, Simple Recycling owner Adam Winfield told Council, “Simple Recycling has had just over 4,000 residents participate in the program in January. So there’s got to be something else going on. We haven’t taken 13,000 donations because we haven’t had 13,000 residents participate in the program. So I just want to make sure that there’s transparency and understanding as we collect this data moving forward because there seems to be some confusion.”

Council Member Ora Houston asked Berry how she knew that Simple Recycling had caused their loss of revenue. She noted that half of the city has not even received the curbside recycling bags.

Berry said, “I know nothing else has changed, and I know that in the stores that we have outside of Austin we have actually seen a growth in donations and only Austin stores have not.”

Among those addressing Council was Andrew Dobbs of the Texas Campaign for the Environment. Dobbs told Council that his group does not believe that Simple Recycling will end up harming local nonprofits. However, if the evidence shows that to be the case, he said, the group would support canceling the contract.

Recycling block leader Dena Houston lives in District 10 and is no relation to the Council member. She told Council that she had gone to meetings amongst the nonprofits, Simple Recycling and city staff to try to work out a solution. She said she had heard a number of good ideas, but at the end of the day the only solution that Goodwill, the Salvation Army, the Assistance League and Easter Seals would accept was cancellation of the contract.

“I was very disappointed,” said Dena Houston. “Most people do what is most convenient,” she said, adding that she thought canceling the contract would work against the city’s zero-waste goal. “I want a choice,” she said.

Jan Gunter of the Salvation Army told Council that her charity last year diverted 983 tons of textiles out of landfills. She indicated that she would reluctantly accept the six-month time period for the city to research the impact of the contract.

City staff said all of the nonprofits were given an opportunity to bid on the contract, but none of them did.

Council Member Houston asked Berry why Goodwill and the other organizations had not bid on the contract and was told that they don't compete against one another.

Winfield told Council that his experience in other cities was that he was collecting textiles that would otherwise be thrown in the trash, not donated.

"I agree that if all that material was going to those organizations, there would be no place for us. But it's not. It's going into the trash can and into the landfill. I'm offering a convenient alternative to throwing it into the landfill," Winfield said.

He also pointed out that Simple Recycling does not collect from multifamily units, so nonprofits would be able to do that if they wanted.

However, Winfield promised to get started immediately on providing information to his curbside customers about donating goods to the nonprofits.