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NEW DETAILS COMPOSTING

# Compost collection debated

City staffers suggest phasing in citywide service for households.

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Carrol Seale is a believer in Austin composting. That doesn't mean doing it was always easy.

She tried to make up games to help her kids, ages 13 and 9, remember which scraps went where: recycling, composting or trash. The city-provided compost bin was too big to fit in her kitchen, so Seale purchased a smaller one from the Container Store, with a tight lid to ward off the fruit flies that would buzz when someone forgot to seal it.

Into the compost bin goes organic materials, including uneaten food, yard trimmings and old pizza boxes.

The family's commitment to regularly sorting its organic waste from regular trash "goes in cycles," Seale said. But building the habit through a city pilot program has made Seale support expanding composting citywide.

Whether to commit to that, with the costs and resident fees associated with it, is up for debate at City Hall as budget talks amp up for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

City staffers have suggested phasing in curbside collection of composting materials from all Austin households over a period of five years. The program's first year would cost \$4.2 million and add \$1 to monthly utility bills.

The fees would incrementally increase to reach \$5.40 per month in the fifth year.

The city would have to buy new trucks and add 55 employees, for a cost of \$23.2 million after five years.

Advocates say composting is the necessary next step toward the city's "Zero Waste" goal, which aims to reduce trash sent to landfills and incinerators 90 percent by 2040. Austin is behind in its goals to divert landfill waste.

It could prevent the expense of building new landfills, advocates say. The city has estimated that 46 percent of Austin's waste is compostable.

Others caution that \$5.40 per month is a substantial fee for some Austin families, particularly for a program that residents might find tough to commit to.

The pilot program, which began in 2013, phased in compost pickup to 14,000 homes in 10 pockets of the city. It provides a separate bin for food scraps, paper items, yard waste, hair, lint and small wooden items. Pickup is weekly.

City staff estimated nearly two-thirds of those homes leave something organic at the curb on any given week.

In a budget workshop discussion on the program Wednesday, staffers mentioned options of rolling out citywide composting as quickly as three years or as slowly as seven years, which would speed up or delay the costs.

Mayor Steve Adler and Council Members Delia Garza, Leslie Pool and Kathie Tovo expressed support for moving forward on composting. Council Members Ellen Troxclair and Sheri Gallo expressed some hesitation at the cost and asked whether residents could be allowed to opt in or opt out if they wanted.

"We're looking at a balance of not pricing our community out of our community and doing what's best for the environment," Gallo said.

Staffers cautioned against allowing residents to opt out. Doing so would make it much more expensive for those who did choose to participate, as trucks would still have to travel the same routes for pickup, said Bob Gedert, director of Austin Resource Recovery.

Garza said \$5.40 per month amounts to a small part of the average person's budget, and that should be weighed against the benefits of reducing waste.

“If we don’t implement policies like these and instead seek to just have a blanket ‘We want Austin to be affordable for everybody,’ if that’s an Austin that has 10 dumps in my district and three more gas plants ... we have to rethink,” she said.

Other proponents of the program have noted that if residents start putting more waste into their compost bins, they might be able to reduce the size of their trash cart and lower their overall cost that way.

Gedert said he considered the council’s reaction promising. The council will decide during future budget discussions whether to approve expenditures for the program.

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Texas Campaign for the Environment area director Andrew Dobbs checks out a banner of photos of residents who support composting Wednesday. CONTRIBUTED



A worker wheels a household organic materials cart to the collection truck in 2014, during a city of Austin pilot program for curbside compost collection. DEBORAH CANNON / AMERICAN-STATESMAN 2014