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Austin Water Utility wins stimulus dollars to upgrade Hornsby Bend

By Bill McCann

The **Texas Water Development Board** on Thursday approved \$31.8 million in federal economic stimulus funding for the **City of Austin** to expand and upgrade the **Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant**.

Austin Water Utility officials say the funding, which will be in the form of a 30-year, zero-interest loan, will save the city about \$22 million in interest payments over the loan period.

Funding for Hornsby Bend will come from the nearly \$172 million funneled to the state for clean water projects under the **American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009**, signed by **President Obama** on Feb. 17 to help create jobs and jump-start the economy.

The TWDB, which is administering federal stimulus funds for water and wastewater projects in Texas, yesterday approved a priority list of clean-water projects statewide to receive funding. The Hornsby Bend facility, where sewage sludge is processed and recycled, was the top ranked "green" project on the priority list.

"Hornsby Bend is a unique facility where we are already doing a lot of good things," said **Gopal Guthikonda**, the Austin Water Utility's assistant director of engineering services. "This (funding) will give us the opportunity to do even more."

The Hornsby Bend facility takes sewage sludge – the solids from sewage – from the city's wastewater treatment plants and treats it. Some of the treated sludge is mixed with grass clippings and other yard waste and recycled to make compost, which the city sells as "Dillo Dirt." **Currently, the plant produces about 40,000 cubic yards of the compost a year.** The city has been operating the Dillo Dirt program for 20 years. It was the first of its type in the state and has received many awards over the years for its environmental benefits.

The utility will use the economic stimulus funds for several projects at Hornsby Bend, including adding composting pads and eventually doubling the production of Dillo Dirt, Guthikonda said. Sludge-digesting equipment also will be upgraded to improve efficiency in processing the sludge and to increase the production of methane gas in the digestion process, he said. The methane is used as fuel to operate boilers for heating the digesters.

A third key project will be to add equipment to improve the quality of the methane for use as fuel to run electric generators. The power will be used for operating the plant and some of it will

go to the power grid.

The utility's next step is to prepare and submit a formal application to the TWDB for the funds, as well as design drawings and contract documents, according to Guthikonda. The City Council on Thursday voted to authorize staff to apply for the funding and to negotiate any agreements with the TWDB. At the same time, the Council approved an additional \$3.5 million to allow engineering firms on the utility rotation list to finalize designs on the Hornsby Bend work. That will help make sure that the utility meets the February 2010 bidding deadline to receive funding.