

Austin waste contract recommendations in, but political disputes go on

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Highlights

- Policy disputes halted all-new Austin waste contracts in April, after the City Council nixed several.
- Proposals from a working group may let contracts move forward but don't satisfy a powerful area waste company.



Anaerobically digested Class B biosolids at Hornsby Bend wastewater treatment plant on June 16. JAY JANNER/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Giant curing piles of compost, processed from human waste and yard clippings, had overtaken nearly all the plowed space at the Hornsby Bend wastewater plant in June, as the staff fretted about how to get rid of them.

An updated contract to process the plant's biosolids has been on hold since December amid a review of city waste contract policies, and despite the uncertainty, Austinites kept flushing their toilets. More than 60,000 cubic yards of unscreened compost was on the site, staffers estimated, some of it having sat there for a year.

Soon, after more than a half-year delay, bidding on a new contract might finally move forward — with stricter requirements to produce only compost from the biosolids — if the City Council approves recommendations from a working group.

Policy disputes halted the issuance of all new city waste agreements in April, after City Council members voted to nix several staff-recommended contracts on the advice of the city's Zero Waste Advisory Commission. Frustrated contractors and staff members said they didn't know which practices the council wanted to follow.

On Aug. 15, council members will receive recommendations issued by the **Waste Management Policy Working Group**, which have largely satisfied stakeholders and companies vying for city business involved in the discussions — except Texas Disposal Systems, whose clashes with the city staff helped prompt the review.

“While some of the responses were good and just need to be fleshed out to be more specific, some of them I was very disappointed in,” said Bob Gregory, president of TDS. “Particularly how the anti-lobby ordinance will be revised.”

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In recent years, TDS has taken issue with how the city staff has drafted some requests for proposals and opposed a requirement, meant to protect the process from political influence, that companies attempting to get city jobs refrain from talking to city officials about them. TDS stopped submitting proposals for city contracts and instead lobbied city officials to be hired outside of that process.

The working group recommendations would scale back the time frame when lobbying rules would apply and allow contractors to talk to officials about subjects unrelated to a specific proposal. But that doesn’t go far enough to get TDS back to the table, said Gregory, who argued that he should be able to bring up any issues with proposal requests as they arise. He plans to submit responses to the City Council before it considers a vote on the recommendations next month.

“I believe that council will approve policy changes that are different from what the recommendations are,” he said. “As proposed, we will not bid.”

Other waste management companies, many of whom have grumbled that TDS doesn’t play by the rules, said keeping the anti-lobbying ordinance applicable to waste contracts was a top priority in the review.

“The most important thing I wanted to see was that bid and RFP processes would continue to be the responsibility of the Austin Resource Recovery Department ... and that they’re not going to be interfered with by other proposals being submitted outside of the process,” said Steve Shannon, president of Progressive Waste Solutions.

Other working group recommendations include:

- Revising the definition of “local” in proposal scoring matrices to include an area presence, not just offices within city limits — a move that would benefit Creedmoor-based TDS and several other bidders.
- Creating criteria to direct which landfills are preferable for receiving city waste, based on environmental factors.
- Continuing the practice of using the city waste-removal staff as a “vendor of last resort” for some special events.
- Further consideration of how to best manage old utility poles and whether to consolidate some contract services.

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The recommendations surrounding biosolids are to convert 100 percent to compost, ending the process of shipping sludge to spread on ranchland outside the city, known as land application. That will pose a new challenge for city staffers, who said they know of no city other than Denton that processes its biosolids entirely to compost.

“We think we can be successful with the recommendations,” said Daryl Slusher, assistant director for environmental affairs at Austin Water. “But we want to make it clear that we’re getting out ahead of just about every other city.”

The recommendations include a provision to allow for land application in case of unforeseen problems, but Austin wouldn’t be able to do that without existing permits, staffers said. Still, they plan to issue a request for proposals for companies to handle the composting and sell Dillo Dirt, the city-trademarked compost, as soon as council members vote on the anti-lobbying policies in September.

In June, council members broke the contract moratorium to execute a deal with Organics By Gosh for a 36-month rollout of curbside composting. Council members approved the contract over the objections of TDS, which argued that they should wait on the working group recommendations.

Asked what the impact of waiting would be, Donna Gosh, wife of company owner Phil Gosh, had a relatable answer.

“Money,” she said, to laughter. “Plus, we’d have to take another day off and come down here and spend with you lovely people. Which, we do love you, but I mean, goodness gracious, please. May we just stop the nonsense and be done and get on?”

Council members agreed.