

3 companies see treasure in 30 years of Austin trash

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A dump truck backs up to the "working face," the business end of a landfill. The truck bed tilts sharply, and out slide dozens of plastic bags oozing coffee grounds, used tissues, rotten tomatoes, pieces of broken glass and all the other detritus of modern life. An aptly named "compactor" takes over. This 50-ton machine, with oversized steel wheels and a heavy blade, runs back and forth over the garbage, spreading and mashing it into a growing hillside.

The scene repeats itself dozens of times a day at each of three privately owned landfills in Travis County. The companies that own and operate the landfills -- Texas Disposal Systems, Waste Management and Browning-Ferris Industries -- are competing for the most valuable trash prize to be offered locally in years: a 30-year contract with the City of Austin that could be worth \$40 million or more in today's dollars.

Austin currently dumps trash from households and small businesses at its municipally owned landfill in southeastern Travis County. But that practice will cease by the end of the month to accommodate the new airport. Federal aviation rules prohibit the disposal of "putrescible" waste, or rotting organic matter, near airports. The reason: Birds attracted to garbage could collide with planes.

The question of where to dump the city's trash -- more than 100,000 tons a year -- has generated much debate. Some people who live and work near the landfills are concerned about windblown trash, mud on roads, noise and odors -- problems that could be worsened by thousands of additional tons of garbage.

However, long-buried industrial waste at the Waste Management landfill in northeastern Travis County has emerged as perhaps the most contentious issue. The company and state regulators say 21,000 drums of buried waste and a series of acid-disposal pits pose no health or environmental threat. But residents of the Walnut Place, Chimney Hills North and Harris Branch subdivisions are skeptical. They want the industrial waste cleaned up and the city's trash sent elsewhere.

The competition between the companies is fierce. Texas Disposal Systems sued Waste Management in 1997, accusing Waste Management and its public-relations adviser, Don Martin, of engaging in a smear campaign concerning the environmental integrity of the Texas Disposal Systems landfill. Waste Management and Martin deny the allegations.

City officials, in an effort to sort through the claims and counterclaims, have hired a consultant to assess environmental conditions at all three landfills. The consultant also is examining whether the city would face any financial risk if it sent trash to Waste Management and the site were to be listed under the federal Superfund toxic-waste cleanup program.

Meanwhile, an audit report released last month by the city shows that Austin's garbage rates, which average \$15.18 a month, rank second-highest among medium and large cities in Texas. A task force formed by the City Council is preparing recommendations for improving operations in the Solid Waste Services Department. And the City Council is considering whether to close a BFI recycling center in East Austin that has been an unpopular neighbor in a mostly residential area.

"It's not an easy puzzle to put together," said J.D. Porter, chairman of the Solid Waste Advisory Commission, a standing committee that advises the council on trash and recycling matters.

Environmental issues

A sizable piece of the puzzle could come into focus soon. The city's consultant, Carter & Burgess Inc., is finishing a \$95,000 environmental assessment of the landfills.

The findings could be just as important to the council, which is sensitive to environmental concerns, as the cost, location and other factors associated with each landfill.

The council ordered the environmental study after the advisory commission and neighborhood groups expressed concern about the industrial waste buried nearly 30 years ago at the Waste Management landfill. Residents became concerned when the company said it intended to dig up the waste and move it at the landfill -- a plan subsequently placed on hold.

Also on hold is a recommendation by the city staff to split trash shipments between Waste Management and Texas Disposal Systems. The staff had recommended that Waste Management receive 87 percent, with the balance going to Texas Disposal Systems. The total value of the two proposed contracts would have been about \$1.3 million a year, with increases indexed to inflation. BFI, which would have received no waste under the city staff's plan, is now back under consideration, according to city and company officials.

City Manager Jesus Garza said he expects to make a recommendation to the council in the next two weeks or so. Garza probably will call for sending some trash to Texas Disposal Systems and the balance to Waste Management or BFI.

Garza is unlikely to recommend sending trash to all three landfills, because Waste Management and BFI are adjacent to each other. "I think you need to make a decision one way or the other" to avoid sending too much waste to one area, he said.

A place for garbage

Why seek contracts for 30 years in the first place? Garza said it is prudent to lock in disposal capacity for the long term, thereby avoiding any need to haul trash longer distances at higher costs.

The opening of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, scheduled for May 2, has created a sense of urgency. The Federal Aviation Administration requires that disposal of putrescible waste at the city's landfill on FM 812 cease 60 days before the airport opens, said William Rhodes, the city's director of Solid Waste Services.

The city will continue to use the landfill for construction and demolition material, which does not attract birds.

The city has known about the deadline for more than three years and had planned to halt putrescible waste shipments last month. But even if long-term contracts are not finished by the end of this month, the city will still be able to get rid of its trash, Rhodes said. The private landfill companies are willing to accommodate the city temporarily as well as on a long-term basis.

The consultant's environmental assessment could be issued this week, Rhodes said. So far, no findings have been made public.

An American-Statesman review of the three landfills shows much in common but also significant differences. The review included tours of each landfill, examination of state inspection reports and interviews with company executives, state regulators and nearby residents.

No odors were noticed at the boundary of any of the landfills. But at the working face of each site, where dumping and compacting take place, the smell of garbage permeated everything. In all cases, the odor was strong but not overpowering. Each company places a series of mesh fences around the working face to capture windblown plastic, paper and other trash.

Three snapshots

Of the three, Texas Disposal Systems on the southeast outskirts of Austin has the best environmental record. The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, which regulates landfills, has cited only three violations since the landfill opened eight years ago -- none in the past six years. Two violations were for failing to apply sufficient soil cover. Landfill operators are required to cover trash regularly to guard against rainfall penetration, erosion and scavenging by animals. One violation was for tracking mud onto FM 1327.

The company is privately held. Bob Gregory, chief executive officer, owns 80 percent; his brother, Jimmy, owns 20 percent. They have set aside part of the tract as a wildlife preserve, with bison, impala and scimitar-horned oryx.

"It's a public-relations deal more than anything," Bob Gregory said of the wildlife. "The neighbors love it."

Public relations aside, Texas Disposal Systems has turned some early opponents into supporters.

"We fought them tooth and nail to keep them out of here, but after they won the permit rights they've been a good neighbor," said Robert Wilhite, mayor of nearby Creedmoor, population 249. "If the winds are blowing, I've seen them send as many as 20 people out along the highway to pick up trash."

Not everyone is laudatory. Richard Zike, an appliance repairman who stopped for a cold drink at the Creedmoor Country Grocery the other day, said some of his customers in the neighborhood complain about odors, blowing debris and heavy truck traffic.

The site does not have synthetic liners used at most landfills to guard against leakage. Instead, the company uses layers of clay that regulators deemed equally effective.

Waste Management's landfill is the oldest of the three. Conservation commission files show nine violations in the past five years, including erosion, inadequate soil cover and failure to post an attendant at the working face to monitor incoming loads. The publicly held company settled several violations in June 1996 by agreeing to a \$6,000 administrative penalty.

But as recently as November, some of the problems had recurred. A state inspection prompted by residents' complaints documented erosion channels up to 3 feet deep. Erosion is a problem because it causes waste and soil to wash away.

"Obviously, we're not happy with it," said Ric Green, district manager for Waste Management, referring to the violation history. "That's why we have new management here. There's a lot more attention to the details of those things."

The company has not abandoned its plan to excavate the industrial waste and place it in a new, 12-acre pit with a synthetic liner. Under the plan, municipal trash would be placed atop the new industrial-waste area.

But the plan is on hold and subject to change, Green said. He added that the company would consult closely with state regulators and neighbors before proceeding.

The BFI landfill, adjacent to Waste Management along Giles Road between Austin and Manor, has only 10 years of remaining capacity at the current rate of disposal and therefore did not get much consideration in the city staff's initial review. But now it's getting a second look, said Rhodes, the city waste director.

The landfill has had three violations in the past five years -- one involving paperwork concerning ground water sampling and two for excessive levels of methane gas, an explosive substance produced by decaying garbage. The methane problem appears to have been solved by a network of piping that extracts the gas and routes it to a miniature power plant, where the methane drives generators that produce electricity for the City of Austin's grid.

BFI gets generally good marks from residents for covering buried waste with soil and grass and for picking up windblown trash, said Joyce Best, who chairs a neighborhood committee in nearby Harris Branch.

"We do not have 30 years' life in the landfill," said Lynda Rife, a spokeswoman for BFI, "but we'd still like the city's business."

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Illustration: Tom Lankes//AA-S

COLOR PHOTO, PHOTOS, GRAPHS

At the working face of the Texas Disposal Systems landfill near Creedmoor, a compactor with huge steel wheels mashes and spreads trash dumped by a commercial hauler. Texas Disposal Systems is one of the three companies competing for the City of Austin's trash business.

A byproduct of buried trash is methane gas, which Browning-Ferris Industries gathers with a system of pipes and uses to generate electricity. At left is Lynda Rife of BFI.

The deer and the buffalo roam on part of the Texas Disposal Systems landfill in southeast Travis County. Co-owner Bob Gregory gets a friendly lick from one of several resident bison.