

# THE DAILY TEXAN

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## Landfill hopes to give garbage a good name

### TDS boasts animal refuge, state-of-the-art technology

By Delaney Hall

Dennis Hobbs is proud of the Texas Disposal Systems landfill - its remarkably odorless expanses, its new Caterpillar 836H trash compactors, the fecund compost produced at its mulching facility, and, not least, the exotic animal preserve that stretches for acres behind the dump. Seriously, there are zebras back there. Hobbs says the animal preserve is just one of the ways TDS gives back to the Austin community.

All the trash that leaves your curb heads to the Texas Disposal Systems landfill, said Hobbs, TDS director of special projects.



Media Credit: Joe Buglewicz

Landfill workers empty a semi-trailer filled with 24.5 tons of garbage. This amount represents the daily trash production of roughly 19,000 individuals.

City residents generate around 120,000 tons of garbage yearly: enough to fill the Erwin Events Center to the brim three times. Businesses and apartment complexes (who negotiate their own trash services) produce additional waste. The University, for example, produced 2629 tons of garbage in the 2004-05 fiscal year.

But despite the sheer quantity, there is a curious out-of-sight-out-of-mind effect with waste, said Bob Fernandez, who works at the City of Austin's Material Recovery Facility. People drag their trash cans out to the curb, then forget about it.

## **The Landfill**

Hobbs sits near the landfill gatehouse as trucks file into the dumping area. He surveys the scene admiringly as fleets of rollofs, frontloaders, sideloaders, and recyclers ascend onto a huge scale. The gatekeepers scrutinize the smaller haulers and charge them per cubic yard. Steel and tree trimmings are diverted for recycling projects.

The trucks wend through mountains of buried waste to the working face of the fill, where they dump their loads. Here, trash compactors, dinosaurian tractors with steel-cleated wheels, roll back and forth over the garbage, smashing it down as tightly as possible.

"If you were to come in here with a knife and cut through these hills like a cake, you'd see layer upon layer," Hobbs said. The working face grows 14 vertical feet each day, before it's topped with a new 6 inch layer of clean dirt. Hobbs estimates a 40-year lifespan for the fill.

"For years and years, the perception of landfills has been really negative," Hobbs said. "People still think about the old dumps - a depression or an old gravel pit - which were always really unsafe. But we like to say that the difference between a dump and a landfill is \$5 million and a lot of engineering."

The TDS landfill is built on 400 feet of compacted, impermeable clay and its floor is sloped toward lower areas so that fluids that leak from the trash can be collected in gravel-lined trenches. Ground water is monitored, as is methane, a natural by-product of rotting garbage and a potential energy source.

TDS, founded in 1977, has contracted with the City of Austin since 2000. The landfill takes in around 2,500 tons of solid waste a day - some of that from Austin, some from San Antonio, some from Georgetown, and some from smaller, individual haulers.

TDS is one of 5 operating landfills in Travis County, said Jerry Hendrix, spokesman for the City of Austin Solid Waste Services. Until 1999, the City took all of its garbage to one of the dumps out near the airport.

However, once the new airport went in, that landfill had to be converted to accept only

non-putrescible waste, which doesn't rot. It's illegal to run a residential waste landfill within 10,000 feet of commercial airports, Hendrix explained.

Putrescible waste, you see, attracts "vectors" - trash jargon for rodents, snakes and birds. And with birds, which can be sucked into airplane engines or smashed against the windows, you get accidents. So now most the city's residential waste goes southeast of the city to the TDS landfill.

"We're really proud of this whole operation," Hobbs said, "I don't think there's another landfill in the nation that does things the way we do."

That's probably true. TDS is remarkably popular with its neighbors, a feat for a waste disposal site. (Explaining this, Hobbs pointed out the 900 flowering photinia bushes planted on the site's east side.) And TDS, he explained, is the only independent, privately-owned landfill in Texas. TDS, he said, has its own composting facilities where shredded tree trimmings are mixed by scarab trucks, named after the dung-eating beetle. And, not to be overlooked, TDS has an exotic animal refuge behind it, stocked by TDS owners with ostriches, zebras, and assorted antelope.

"This is one way we try to give back to the community," Hobbs said, driving through a gate, away from the landfill, and into a green field, where zebras grazed near a pond stocked with black swans. An ostrich, taller than the truck, approached a window, drawn to Hobbs' glinting wrist watch. "They love shiny things," Hobbs said, rolling up the window, "That guy's brain is smaller than his eye."

TDS lets groups, non-profits and business partners, use the facility, which consists of many acres of land for the wild animals, plus a lodge for dinners or fundraisers. About 55,000 people visit the landfill every year, he said.

## **THE RECYCLING CENTER**

The Austin City Materials Retrieval Facility, a recycling center, smells like aging soda, beer, and milk. School kids come through on field trips and complain about the smell, said Bob Fernandez, who oversees this facility. "I tell them, to me, it smells like money," he said.

30% of Austin's solid waste is diverted to one of three recycling centers. The Austin City Materials Retrieval Facility receives about 39,000 tons of paper, steel, aluminum, plastic and glass each year. The recyclable material is sorted, processed, and sold.

The hub of the recycling center is a big, humming sorting machine. The machine processes 10 to 12 tons of material per hour.

All of the mixed materials travel up a conveyor belt into the belly of the machine. The steel is sucked from the mix first, with large magnets. The rest of it, aluminum, plastic and glass, travels on to a cyclone which whirls the materials into the air - the heavier

materials settle to the bottom and the plastic moves to the top. The plastic is then sorted by hand.

The aluminum is sucked from the mix by an electric field, which creates an eddy current. Next the glass is smashed by a flailing arm pulverizer, which looks like 85 hammers attached to a piston, whipping back and forth, Fernandez said. Two pulverizers turn the glass to a smooth-edged gravel, which will be used to grade roads.

Fernandez said that the costs of running the facility outweigh the profits. "But it's not really that we're losing money," he continued. "Dumping this stuff as garbage doesn't generate any profit at all. Recycling might not be paying for itself, but garbage is even more costly."

Plastic is especially valuable these days, he said, going for \$660 per ton. A year ago it would've sold for half that, but with oil prices so high, it's less expensive to recycle plastic than make it from virgin materials.

The paper is baled as well and sold to manufacturers who pour it all into a big blender, then smooth it out and dry it into new usable sheets. The aluminum is usually turned into new cans. The plastic might be used to make nylon filler for down vests and the like.

"People are always finding new ways to use recyclable materials," Fernandez said. "It's, of course, far more sustainable than disposal. Disposal really addresses only human health needs. Recycling reduces environmental impact. The material that's re-used creates an economic impact, the community focuses on it and gathers around it and participates in it."