

News

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TDS proposed bag recycling plan could throw wrench into bag ban

By Mike Kanin

Texas Disposal Systems CEO Bob Gregory has drawn criticism from both city staff and the city's other major recycling contractor for his attempt to institute a plastic bag recycling program. If it gains any traction, Gregory's proposal could postpone a vote on the City of Austin's plastic bag ban, currently scheduled for March 1.

Gregory's plan calls for a curbside plastic bag recycling program. If adopted, it would have **Austin Resource Recovery** customers stuffing any plastic bags that they may collect into something along the lines of a pillow. That system, argues Gregory, would allow the city's recycling contractors to process the bags as part of their single-stream service. (See *Whispers*, 2-24-12)

At its February meeting, the city's **Environmental Board** endorsed the idea of exploring a program that would operate along the lines of Gregory's proposal. Gregory told *In Fact Daily* that his proposal could serve as either a replacement for or a compliment to the city's proposed bag ban. "There will still be single-use bags, even with the ban," he said.

Austin Resource Recovery is nearing what it hopes will be the end of a contentious process that could result in some form of city-wide ban on single-use bags. The council could take action on the matter after this Thursday's public hearing.

On Friday morning, the vice chair of Austin's **Zero Waste Advisory Council, Rick Cofer**, emailed Council members and their aides. In his communication he referenced an editorial that appeared in that morning's edition of the *Austin-American Statesman*.

"I want to emphasize that the editorial supports a ban on single use plastic bags. The editorial suggests delaying action on this item for several months. I am writing you today to strongly discourage you from postponing this item from the March 1 agenda," he wrote. "More than 5 years of work has gone into this ordinance and a tremendous amount of stakeholder input has gone into the ordinance in the last several months. In particular, please note that H-E-B and Texas Campaign for the Environment support the proposed ordinance. There is a broad coalition of people representing a wide spectrum of attitudes supporting action on this ordinance."

Both Cofer's email and the editorial came in the wake of an email Gregory sent to council that outlined his proposal. ARR head **Bob Gedert** responded skeptically to the plan. "The goal of the proposed bag ordinance before Council is to eliminate the distribution of approximately 263 million single-use bags annually in Austin and replace those bags with reusable bags for retail distribution," he wrote in an email. "The proposal submitted by Mr. Gregory would only provide service to the Austin Resource Recovery customer base and would neglect more than 200,000 households that do not receive Austin Resource Recovery service. In addition to this concern, the continued practice of single-use bag distribution is counter to the Zero Waste goals of the City."

TDS competitor and local partner in the City of Austin's residential single stream recycling program, **Balcones Resources**, was also concerned. After emphasizing that his company is also the city's partner in the program, and would do whatever city staff instructed it to, Balcones **CEO Kerry Getter** ticked off a list of worries. "There are a tremendous number of operational issues," he told *In Fact Daily*.

Getter first noted the fact that the cost of processing the bags, coupled with the relative low return on their resale, would be a challenge. "(The bags) have been out there since the '70s. If there was a way to make money doing this there would be a tremendous number of examples out there that people would site," he said.

According to Getter, it takes 66 bags to make a pound of recyclable plastic material. It takes 132,000 bags to make a ton. He put the market price for plastic bag resale at between \$200 and \$400 a ton. He called that "not much, especially when you consider the man-hours you employ."

The environmental board brought up the prospect of a Wisconsin program that would have residents of that municipality engaged in an effort not unlike Gregory's proposal. Cofer referred to it in his email. "Currently there is only one program in America similar to the TDS proposal, and that program just recently started in Madison, WI," he wrote. "This is not a sufficient reason to delay action any further."

For his part, Gregory noted that Getter could be right. "The program might cost more money," he said.

Gregory also noted that he would offer his plastic bag recycling ideas to the 30 other municipalities that TDS serves. He added that his team was currently working on the engineering of a system to handle the bags and the bags that they will be stuffed inside.

He pointed out that he felt that the issue wouldn't be limited to single-use bags. He called the reusable bags that the city plans to have residents substitute for their single-use cousins a "major problem" for recycling operators, noting that some were likely to end up in the waste stream, regardless of city intentions.