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Eleventh-hour efforts unlikely to prevent Council approval of bag ban

By Mike Kanin

With Council action on a plastic bag ban expected this evening, all seven Council offices were inundated with phone calls this week on behalf of the **Texas Retailers Association**. The calls, designed to illustrate opposition to the idea, began as early as Monday. By mid-day Wednesday, one office reported as many as 60 calls from citizens opposed to the ban.

The Texas Retailers' effort joins a separate one from **Texas Disposal Systems CEO Bob Gregory**. Gregory hopes to sell Council members on the idea of a curbside plastic bag recycling program. His plan – despite a similar call from the city's Environmental Board – has met with some skepticism at City Hall. **Austin Resource Recovery Director Bob Gedert** also doubts Gregory's proposal.

Neither of the 11th-hour appeals are likely to derail at least some form of a bag ban.

Texas Retailers' spokesperson **Mike Meroney** told *In Fact Daily* that his group was engaged in an awareness campaign. “We want Council to know that there are people” opposed to the idea, he said. “The concept is, just do one last push by our group that says 'don't turn your back on recycling.’”

The Retailers are suggesting that recycling the bags would be a better option. He pointed to a \$3.3 million cost overrun that has plagued the city's effort to build a hike and bike boardwalk along Lady Bird Lake. He noted that the boardwalk could have been made from “indestructible” boards made of recycled plastic bags, and that such an effort would have cut costs.

The Retailers' Association would like Council to leave voluntary efforts in place. Its members argue that the ban could come with health risks derived from unclean reusable bags. The phone calls were solicited by Texas Retailers Association staff, which called interested parties, reminded them about the pending bag ban, and asked if they could connect them to Council offices.

Gregory's plan would have the city add plastic bag recycling to its single-stream residential pick ups (See *In Fact Daily* Feb. 27, 2012). Despite doubts from City Hall and staff about whether his program would work for Austin, Gregory believes that curbside plastic bag recycling is achievable through the use of a separate bag that residents would use to collect their single-use plastic bags. Meroney calls the plan “ingenious,” though he admits that the Texas Retailers Association did not work with Gregory on the idea.

Gedert, however, was far from pleased. His memo was direct to the point of frustration. "Upon initial evaluation of the proposed 'Bag the Bag' proposal from Mr. Gregory, the curbside collection of single-use bags (in replacement of the bag ordinance) would: shift retail costs for recycling single-use plastic bags to Austin residents, continue distribution of single-use bags, which is contrary to the Zero Waste goals of the City, use waste-to-energy (burning the bags) as a disposal method...which is NOT (emphasis Gedert's) diversion, and increase the proposed curbside collection costs and thus raise rates," he wrote.

"Based on these impacts, I do not support the 'Bag the Bag' proposal," he said.

Gedert has presented several versions of the bag ban to Council Members. Austin **Mayor Lee Leffingwell**, who has worked extensively on the ban, favors a version that would limit the ordinance to plastic bags. Leffingwell's proposal would allow retailers to continue the use of paper.