



# Are you **recycling** ... **correctly?**



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a confusing  
topic.”**

**Victoria Acevedo,**  
education and outreach  
coordinator at Balcones  
Resources in eastern  
Travis County

## Good habits needed for Austin to reach zero waste goal

**Heather Osbourne** Austin American-Statesman | USA TODAY NETWORK

As Austin stays committed to its zero waste goal of reducing the amount of trash sent to its landfills 90% by 2040, local recycling experts say residents still have much to learn when it comes to what items belong in their blue bin.

Syringes. Batteries. Tampons. Plastic forks. These are just a few of the items that were polluting a small section among a huge mound of broken glass waiting to be picked up by a buyer at Balcones Resources, which typically processes recyclables for those living north of the Colorado River.

Victoria Acevedo, education and outreach coordinator at Balcones Resources in eastern Travis County, told the American-Statesman that it might

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**Materials are sorted at a Texas Disposal Systems facility in February. The facility recycles 20 to 25 tons of material per hour, including glass, cardboard, paper, aluminum and plastic.**

MIKALA COMPTON/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

# Recycling

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surprise some in Austin that many of the items scattered among the glass — small children's toys, single-use cutlery and candy wrappers — are too small to be recycled.

While the small plastics do not stop the glass from being properly morphed into new items, some of the plastics, such as disposable razors, EpiPens and cigarette lighters, make it dangerous for line workers sorting through them.

"Recycling can be such a confusing topic," Acevedo said. "Residents often do what we call 'wishcycling.' They throw things into a recycling bin in the hopes that they will be recycled, like plastic cutlery."

Recyclers want people to realize "that these are real people, not just machines, sorting these recyclables by hand," she continued. "Improper recycling can be dangerous for our workers."

A push toward zero waste in Austin ramped up after a 2015 study found that more than 80% of the city's materials sent to local landfills could have been recycled or composted. Compostable items, such as food waste and soiled pizza boxes, made up about 37% of materials sent to local landfills, the study found.

Businesses and apartments generated more than 85% of the trash and recycling in Austin, according to the 2015 study. Single-family homes up to fourplexes were responsible for less than 15% of the total trash and recycling generated.

In response to the study, Austin in 2018 adopted its Universal Recycling Ordinance, which in part required food-related businesses to divert a percentage of their waste from local landfills to recycling and composting centers.

About 19 years away from Austin's goal to reduce the amount of trash sent to landfills 90% by 2040, the city in 2021 reported a diversion rate of 41.96%.

To increase the diversion rate and reach that goal, recycling experts are working to better educate Austin-area residents about what more can be done to limit what goes into their trash bins.

What does not belong in my recycling bin?

The dangers of improperly sorting waste in Austin were evident in January after two Balcones Resources facilities in Travis and Williamson counties caught fire within a week of each other, the second blaze injuring two firefighters.

Fire investigators were unable to find the source of the fires within the rubble of burned debris, but Alexandra Gyrfas of Balcones Resources said, "We can very confidently say it was most likely a battery."

Battery-operated items have increased significantly at Austin's recycling centers over the past few years, according to Acevedo. These items, such as toys, musical greeting cards and small electronics, often come to the facilities with batteries still attached, and they can easily spark even if the batteries are dead.

Adam Gregory, business development specialist with Texas Disposal Systems operating out of Creedmoor, agreed. TDS, unlike Balcones Resources, which focuses solely on recycling, is also a landfill and composting center that stretches across more than 1,760 acres. Both businesses have contracts with the city of Austin, but each provides services to different sections of the metro area.

In addition to the battery issue, Gregory said plastic grocery bags and gar-



Texas Disposal Systems recycles tires at its Creedmoor location. The site also accepts furniture and scrap metal. MIKALA COMPTON/AMERICAN-STATESMAN



Workers at Balcones Resources in eastern Travis County stack bales of recycled items ready to be picked up by buyers. PROVIDED BY BALCONES RECYCLING

bage bags — even thick plastic bags like those at H-E-B — should never be added to your recycling bin as they easily wrap around the recycling machines and damage them.

Items to be recycled should instead be put into the bin loose, without any bags holding them, Gregory explained.

"We get single-use plastic bags, garden hoses, coat hangers and live lithium ion batteries that should not be in the recycling containers," Gregory said. "Proper placement of the materials in the correct receptacles go a long way."

Some other commonly used items not acceptable in the recycling bins are:

- Candy wrappers.
- Take-out and freezer containers.
- Hardcover books.
- Napkins, paper towels and tissues.
- Pens and markers.
- Electronic cords.

So what should Austin-area residents do with those items if they cannot be placed in their recycling bin?

For those who have access to a vehicle, the Recycle & Reuse Drop-off Center in Southeast Austin takes many of these items, including Styrofoam, household chemicals, electronics and batteries.

Grocery stores often will accept unwanted plastic bags, and public libraries within the city limits have bins available to discard batteries.

TDS accepts large unwanted items such as furniture, tires and scrap metal at its Creedmoor location.

## What belongs in my recycling bin?

The first step toward placing an item

has the potential to not be single-use," she continued.

"We want to create a circular economy of items and refuse single-use items or donate other items when we don't need them."

For recyclable objects that have reached their full life span and cannot be donated, Austin-area residents are encouraged to learn what should go into each of their bins or dumpsters, Acevedo said.

Only single-family homes in Austin have access to composting, leaving those living in apartment complexes with few options to reduce the amount of food waste that goes into the trash.

However, as a result of Austin's recycling ordinance, apartment complexes are required to offer recycling to their residents.

The most important thing to remember for items being placed in the recycling bin is to make sure they are clean and dry, according to TDS' Gregory.

"We do want the materials clean, but you don't need to put them in your dishwasher," Gregory said. "It's a balance because we don't want you wasting water cleaning your items to the tiniest bit, but a simple rinse will do."

Recyclable items include:

- Newspapers, magazines and catalogs.
- Phone books and soft-cover books.
- Mixed paper.
- Empty plastic bottles.
- Metal cans, aluminum cans.
- Metal caps and lids.
- Cardboard egg cartons.
- Paper cups.
- Cardboard boxes.
- Glass.

Cans are better if they aren't smashed and bottle tops would be best still attached to the bottles, according to Acevedo. And pizza boxes, which Acevedo said seem to be one of the most confusing items for the public, should go into a compost bin if you have access to one.

Any grease, including from pizza boxes or take-out containers, can easily damage the machines that help sort recycling, Acevedo and Gregory said.

"We understand that single-use items are more convenient for some demographics," Acevedo said. "But it's a lifestyle that we're trying to work toward. It's an ongoing process of educating the public and working toward a goal together that will be ongoing for a lifetime."