

City of Houston Sustainable Growth Committee meeting notes

Council Chambers - January 26, 2009, 2:00 pm

Councilmember Peter Brown presided over the meeting. Also present were Co-chair Councilmember James Rodriguez, Councilmember Wanda Adams, and staff representatives for other Councilmembers.

CM Brown noted that on January 20, 2009, US environmental policy took a change for the better and that the people of Houston have been waiting for government to responsibly address these issues for a long time. He also noted that President Barack Obama has emphasized that solving environmental issues will take cooperation between business, citizens, government, and nonprofit groups and that Houston Mayor Bill White has long used a teamwork approach to address environmental problems in Houston.

City of Houston Recycling Program: A Comprehensive Program for City Buildings and Facilities

Sarah Mason, Senior Environmental Analyst with the City of Houston, presented background on recycling of city waste and a proposal for adopting a comprehensive contract with a private firm to divert a greater amount of waste to recycling. She explained that the City currently has a contract with ACCO that costs the City nothing for ACCO to take any paper waste collected at City facilities. Responding to CM Adams question after the presentation, she said that the new proposal, which will cost an estimated \$312,000 annually, would divert substantially more waste and that the current free program could not be scaled up. Currently, the City also recycles materials other than paper by city employees who have volunteered to help maintain this at each facility. Presumably this was also taken for free by ACCO.

The City put out a proposal to provide recycling for all City facilities. CM Rodriguez asked how many facilities this would be after the presentation and the answer was around 300. To better understand the City's waste stream, a small experiment was conducted on office trash, in which they found that 70% of the waste was paper by weight. In the test sample, Ms. Mason noted that there were also 4 aluminum cans, 10 PET bottles, and other residual waste.

The new program will involve substantial infrastructure beyond simple collection of waste, including data tracking for each facility and a revenue sharing deal such that the City will receive 80% of market value of paper waste, an amount which Ms. Mason said was very low in current market

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conditions. Also, the City will conduct audits of the program, the contractor will provide educational material, and the City will "work towards a holistic material management package" to "maximize the benefits of both programs (traditional waste disposal and the new recycling program)"

Ms. Mason says that the City currently spends \$1.5 million annually on waste disposal, which was later noted to include an estimated 56,000 tons of trash. The proposed program will cost around \$312,000 annually, but will reduce the cost of waste disposal by diverting actual waste. Ms. Mason presented a spreadsheet showing that total cost of both recycling and trash programs will be reduced at the minimum by over \$600,000 over the next five years, even with the new recycling costs. This estimate did not include any income from the revenue sharing estimate and assumed that an additional 10% of the City's current waste will be diverted from traditional trash collection each year over this time.

CM Brown asked if they had any recommendations for what to do about organic waste. Ms. Mason answered that such waste will continue to go into the traditional waste stream, but that diverting that waste to composting facilities is conceivable as such facilities become available in the Houston region. CM Brown asked if it were possible to coordinate such an effort with the City's new solar farms. No one was sure if this was possible.

A representative from CM Sue Lovell's office asked if the educational materials were included in the contract price and Ms. Mason answered yes, they are standard materials from the contractor and are included in the cost. He then asked about employee policies to go along with the new contract as well as training. Ms. Mason said that City policy would be changed to let each employee know his or her responsibilities and that the ability to track recycling by facility will allow the City to address areas of concern over time with training.

Houston Tomorrow's Comments

Ms. Mason did not discuss any analysis of the amount of materials, waste, and emissions that will be created by this program compared to the baseline.

After the meeting, I asked Karl Pepple, Director of

Environmental Programming at City of Houston, if the City is concurrently pursuing any policies to not just divert waste towards recycling, but also reduce consumption and the amount of waste that the City generates. He basically answered yes, saying that the City has done things such as reprogramming all printers and copiers to print on both sides as their default and that they will be using funds saved by using less paper to start buying paper with even more recycled content than the 10% recycled content paper the City currently uses. He also said that the City is looking at the five materials that make up the bulk of the City's consumption - 70% of all items consumed by the City - which includes paper, and is trying to find ways to reduce the need for each of these five items.