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# South Texas

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## Garbage firms dump money, effort into cleaning up image

By Susie Phillips Gonzalez  
Express-News Staff Writer

Two private garbage companies have spent thousands of dollars on community projects, improving their image and muscling their way into City Hall in the process.

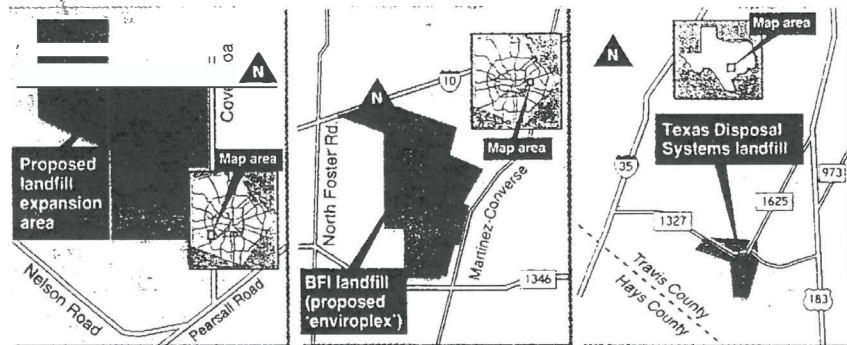
The San Antonio offices of two international firms — Waste Management Inc and Browning-Ferris Industries — and a third company headquartered in southern Travis County, Texas Disposal Systems, are expected to be awarded equivalent contracts in a special City Council meeting at 1 p.m. Wednesday.

That is the last day in office for four council members who have said they want to solve the city's long-range solid-waste problems before stepping down.

The council is scheduled to vote on the police union contract at the same meeting for similar reasons.

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### Private landfill sites



EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

the solid-waste agreements continues between company officials and the city's Public Works Department, the value of the contracts is

estimated at more than \$31 million.

Council members say the competition associated with a three-way

garbage split will put the brakes on future rate increases, and the contracts will guarantee San Antonio a choice of places to dump gar-

bage for the next 30 years.

Still, interest remains in developing a city-run landfill to avoid total dependence upon the private sector.

Shortly after closing Nelson Gardens Municipal Landfill in 1993, the city began trying to form a partnership with Atascosa, Frio and Medina counties to develop a regional landfill in Moore.

No agreement could be reached, and in the words of Councilman Howard Peak, one of the negotiators: "Moore's a goner."

In addition to time spent, the two-year effort cost about \$10,000 for preliminary engineering studies.

Since 1993, BFI, TDS and Waste Management have increased their visibility by bidding on short-term contracts for landfill disposal, contributing to the re-election campaigns of key council members and donating money and equip-

See GARBAGE/2C

# Garbage firms cleaning up image as council weighs waste contracts

Continued from 1C

ment to schools and communities near their operations.

For example, BFI in early May gave \$50,000 to the East Central School District Foundation for park development.

In April, Waste Management supplied workers to haul trash from a neighborhood clean-up site and coughed up disposal fees at an estimated cost of \$125,000.

Both companies have agreed to pay a "host fee" to local school districts and have established school mentoring programs and/or college scholarships.

TDS, located south of Austin, has not concentrated on San Antonio projects but has contributed \$1,000 to Councilman Bob Ross, who won re-election to his second term on May 6, and \$2,500 to Councilman Bill Thornton, who faces Kay Turner in a mayoral runoff today.

Recipients of corporate donations say that their votes cannot be bought and that having three landfill contracts is the best economic option for the city.

"It makes no difference to me whether they help or don't help (with campaign contributions)," Ross said. "I look at it from the point of view of the taxpayer. I think all three have given to me, but I can't say how much. It has no bearing on my vote."

Ross said he believed the community donations proved the companies were maturing in their dealings with the public.

"Apparently, they found they're more acceptable in the communities where they're located when they take a more active role in those neighborhoods," Ross said. "It's part of the whole growing up of the corporate world."

Such comments surprise the private companies, who believe they always have been good corporate citizens.

"We've tried to be up front and honest from the start," said Jim Baker, divisional vice president of BFI. "We are straight shooters. That's one of our strengths."

One of the company's weaknesses was in not recognizing the worries of people living next to the BFI landfill on Tessman Road on the far East Side. Neighbors have focused on safety issues, mainly those related to heavy trucks rumbling along a narrow farm road while children were waiting for school buses.

Anthony Constanzo, East Central school superintendent, said there

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was a time when working with BFI was difficult.

"But they've changed, and I think we've changed, too," Constanzo said. "We are accepting the fact that they're here, and they're here to stay. The attitude is one that if it has to be, we'll try to work with them."

BFI has pushed for development of what Baker called an "enviroplex," using the landfill as a magnet to draw recycling and related businesses, an effort that would help the school district by increasing its tax base, Constanzo said.

On the opposite side of town, Waste Management operates Covel Gardens next to the city's old Southwest Side landfill, which contributed to ill feelings about dumps.

For years, Covel's neighbors opposed it, saying they'd had enough of landfill noises, smells and traffic snarls.

But the company began mounting a campaign to show it cared about the community by donating money for scholarships to the Southwest School District and for a fire truck used by the Southwest Volunteer Fire Department.

It worked. No one opposed a recent Waste Management zoning change that allowed expansion, and the fire chief issued a letter praising the company for keeping its promises.

The company also scored points with city officials by quickly implementing a curbside recycling plan for the Great Northwest when the neighborhood was annexed by the city in 1989, making it the first San Antonio area to recycle.

"I think we might have made a mistake in some of the ways we approached the city, but we have been striving for a better working relationship," said Alec Pittman, group operations vice president

for Waste Management.

"Ever since Waste Management bought Garbage Gobbler, we've been involved in trying to be a good corporate citizen," he added.

Councilman Juan Solis, who faulted previous Waste Management executives for "bullying, Northeastern-type of tactics," said the best thing the company did to improve its image was to bring in new administrators.

"Waste thought they could play hardball with this council," Solis said. "It was important that they changed leadership. This council does not appreciate arrogant people working with them and representing them."

Councilman Lyle Larson also acknowledged a change in the corporate mentality.

"I think all of the folks in the solid-waste disposal business had gotten crosswise with the different areas where they had located their facilities," he said. "But, now, they've gone above and beyond working with us in a straightforward fashion. That's the reason we're guaranteeing each one 50,000 tons" in the contracts.

The value of the contracts will be based a price per ton, though how much exactly still is being negotiated.

Larson is one of the council members whose last day in office is Wednesday. The others are Councilman Roger Perez and Mayor Nelson Wolff. Thornton is leaving his council seat but is hoping to return as mayor.

One person not enamored of the private-sector plan is Linda Chavez-Thompson, state director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

"Our fear is not just the landfill but that eventually they will want the pickup," she said.

Turning trash collection duties over to the private sector companies would eliminate city jobs held by union members.

Chavez-Thompson said she endorsed the city's plan to build a regional landfill and urged the council that takes office Thursday to find another site.

If the city does venture into the landfill business again, it could have as much as 200,000 tons of garbage a year to bury. At least some of that trash could go to one of the private companies.

Councilman Peak referred to that tonnage as "leverage" with the private companies, effectively putting the city in competition with them.

## Garbage firms dump money, effort into cleaning up image

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Council members say the competition associated with a three-way garbage split will put the brakes on future rate increases, and the contracts will guarantee San Antonio a choice of places to dump garbage for the next 30 years.

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Anthony Constanzo, East Central school superintendent, said there was a time when working with BFI was difficult. "But they've changed, and I think we've changed, too," Constanzo said. "We are accepting the fact that they're here, and they're here to stay. The attitude is one that if it has to be, we'll try to work with them."

BFI has pushed for development of what Baker called an "enviroplex," using the landfill as a magnet to draw recycling and related businesses, an effort that would help the school district by increasing its tax base, Constanzo said. "I'd like to think they want to be good neighbors," he said. "Our hopes are high." On the opposite side of town, Waste Management operates Covell Gardens next to the city's old Southwest Side landfill, which contributed to ill feelings about dumps.

For years, Covell's neighbors opposed it, saying they'd had enough of landfill noises, smells and traffic snarls.

But the company began mounting a campaign to show it cared about the community by donating money for scholarships to the Southwest School District and for a fire truck used by the Southwest Volunteer Fire Department. It worked. No one opposed a recent Waste Management zoning change that allowed expansion, and the fire chief issued a letter praising the company for keeping its promises.

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Councilman Peak referred to that tonnage as "leverage" with the private companies, effectively putting the city in competition with them.

"We will scrutinize their proposals very carefully," Peak said. "I'm not letting go of too much leverage."

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