

Critic's plaintive song: 'Mr. Stinson ... wrong'

By Roddy Stinson April 5, 1998 Publication: San Antonio Express-News, Page 3A

The garbage-disposing controversy took a provocative turn last week with a pointed attack on this gazetteer.

In a Sunday growl, I found fault with a recently signed, 28-year, \$100 million-plus contract between the city and Texas Disposal Systems.

On Monday, the president of the Austin-based company fired back.

"... the assumptions Mr. Stinson used to come to his conclusions are wrong," Bob Gregory wrote in a two-page, single-spaced letter sent to Mayor Howard Peak, City Council members and various other community leaders.

Here is the major "assumption" to which Gregory referred: "By delivering waste collected by city crews in north San Antonio to the Starcrest Transfer Station, the city saves an hour per truckload in travel time and waiting time at the other two (South Bexar County) landfills.

This equates to \$30 in personnel costs and \$15 in truck costs per 15- ton load, or \$3 per ton." Let the record note: That isn't my "assumption."

That is a direct quote from a March 4 letter to this Gazette from John German, the city's director of public works.

In Sunday's column, I added the "\$3 per ton" in traveling costs to the costs of dumping the city's garbage in local landfills - \$13.95 and \$14.25 - and got \$16.95 and \$17.25.

The contract with TDS requires the city to take North Side garbage to a site on Starcrest Drive, where it is loaded into trailers and hauled to Buda, about 60 miles away.

The total charge per ton: \$20.62.

It doesn't take a world-class mathematician to see that \$16.95 and \$17.25 are cheaper than \$20.62.

I concluded that by closing down the transfer station and hauling all of the town's garbage to nearby landfills, the city could save as much as \$8 million during the next three decades.

Back to Gregory's howl:

"Mr. Stinson assumed a direct- haul cost (to nearby landfills) of \$3 per ton The actual cost ... is well over \$10 a ton."

During a telephone interview, he repeated that figure and insisted: "You can't do it for \$3 a ton. The number (that German provided) was wrong. I've produced facts to back mine up. Ask him to produce facts to back his up."

Gregory's "facts" are based on assumptions about hauling times and weights of loads that differ from German's assumptions.

Did he talk to German after reading the Sunday column?

"I didn't call John," Gregory said, "but he did get a message to me to leave this alone ... it will go away. "With all due respect, I can't leave this alone You can't do it for \$3 a ton."

I called German to ask about the disagreement. Is the cost of direct hauling \$3 a ton or \$10 a ton?

"I guess it depends on what criteria you use," he said. "I took the most optimistic approach. He (Gregory) took the most pessimistic."

Then the public works director added this stunner:

"I think we did make an error. Looking over the information ... we assumed 15 tons of waste per truck. It's more like seven tons. If you use seven tons, our (cost) becomes \$6 a ton."

A 100 percent "error."

"I think that's closer to the truth," German said. Truth proximity is good. So pick a cost, dear reader: \$3 a ton, \$6 a ton, \$10 a ton or some round number in between.

To shed a little light on this head-scratcher, I called a local company that isn't involved in the controversy and asked about the cost of hauling North Side garbage to the local landfills.

Mel Kemp of Texas Waste Systems said that \$3 a ton is "absolutely" closer to the real cost than \$10 a ton.

Whatever the ultimate "truth" is, the citizens of San Antonio have just been saddled with a 28-year, \$100-million contract - without a peep of protest or timid question from their elected representatives.

Furthermore, North Side council members Tim Bannwolf, Jeff Webster and Robert Marbut have, by their silence, signed off on a three-decade deal that not only carves the transfer-station policy in stone, but allows TDS to haul commercial/industrial waste to and from the Starcrest site.

How much truck traffic will that eventually add in the vicinity of Blossom Athletic Center? Nobody seems to know. And it's clear the three council members - and everyone else at City Hall - couldn't care less.

Of course, that's a "conclusion" based on an "assumption" that our Milquetoast leaders will continue to hunker down and leave this alone ... until it goes away.

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