

Council to close landfill

By Susie Phillips Gonzalez -Express-News Staff Writer

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City Council ordered staff Thursday to close Nelson Gardens municipal landfill as soon as possible and to begin negotiating with two private firms for interim landfill space.

The council, after an hour-long private session Thursday night, decided to abandon efforts to obtain a permit from the Texas Water Commission to extend the life of Nelson Gardens for three years while the city searches for a 2,000-acre site for a regional landfill.

Mayor Nelson Wolff said the council was skeptical about receiving the extension after an internal Water Commission memorandum obtained by the San Antonio Express-News last month identified a number of problems with the city's permit application.

Wolff said then that the Water Commission staff had made up its mind against issuing the permit, and he began leaning in favor of closing Nelson Gardens.

Nelson Gardens already is operating under a permit extension due to expire in April.

A decision by the Water Commission on the latest extension request was expected in March. The extension would have allowed the city to add 200 feet to the height of the landfill.

Helping Wolff and other council members reach the decision to close the landfill now was the fact that strict federal regulations regarding the operation of landfills are scheduled to go into effect in October.

Closing Nelson Gardens saves the city the expense of meeting the new regulations plus about \$10.2 million to relocate a City Public Service transmission line at Nelson Gardens and other expenses involved in preparing the landfill for continued operation. Wolff said the city shouldn't face a garbage crisis, because Browning-Ferris Industries already has begun accepting trash collected by San Antonio crews at its Tessman Road landfill under a \$1 million contract previously approved by the council.

The mayor also said an agreement or agreements with the private companies, Waste Management Inc. and Texas Disposal Systems Inc. of Austin, will be completed and presented to the council for a formal vote next week.

Wolff said the council could enter into contracts with one or both of the companies for service for the next five years.

"This does not affect the decision by the council to continue to develop a Regional Environmental Enterprise Zone," Wolff said. "We still have a long-term objective of creating our own landfill for dealing with refuse."

Plans for the zone include construction of a landfill and sites for related enterprises, such as recycling and composting operations.

Wolff noted that the cost to contract with the private sector will be greater for customers than to continue operating Nelson Gardens, but the precise expense to San Antonio garbage customers won't be known until proposals with the private firms are made public next week.

Last year, the council considered but rejected switching completely to private trash hauling and disposal.

Wolff said any city or private company that delivers trash to Nelson Gardens would have to make other arrangements within 30 days, the target for closing the Southwest Side landfill.

Nelson Gardens is adjacent to the 176-acre Covell Gardens landfill under construction by Waste Management. Texas Disposal Systems operates a 341-acre landfill near the Travis County-Hays County line south of Austin.

Spokesmen for both companies said they were eager to negotiate with the city.

Councilman Bill Thornton touched off the debate by releasing a memorandum calling for the city to enter into a partnership with Waste Management for use of Covell Gardens.

Thornton said he envisioned the city buying the state-issued permit now held by Waste Management in exchange for an agreement allowing the company to continue operating its landfill.

"I am not for keeping a bad landfill open," Thornton said. "I don't think we're going to get the permit, and a relationship with Waste Management would give us control in several areas where we don't have control now."

If the city held the permit, it would retain fiscal control and operational oversight, Thornton said.

But Waste Management, which is the largest environmental company in the world, would operate and assume liability for the landfill.

Maintaining a link with Waste Management also would keep the landfill on the tax rolls of the city and Southwest School District, Thornton noted.

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