

Decision to shut landfill may boost garbage fees

Using private firms could double proposed increase

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City Council's decision to close Nelson Gardens municipal landfill and turn to the private sector for solid-waste disposal service will require a much higher garbage fee increase than originally proposed, officials said Friday.

But the cost is less than what it would have been to keep the problem-plagued facility open and in compliance with environmental regulations scheduled to go into effect in October, officials said.

Instead of a proposed 75-cent increase in the current monthly garbage rate of \$8.99, a rate increase of \$1.49 may be required to cover costs, said Council man Henry Avila, in whose Southwest Side district the landfill is located.

It still will cost ratepayers about \$3 million to close Nelson Gardens, Avila said, but the cost would have exceeded \$10 million if the council had voted to continue pursuing a state permit to expand the facility.

Two companies, Waste Management Inc. and Texas Disposal Systems Inc. of Austin, are negotiating with the Public Works Department to provide interim landfill service for San Antonio while the city searches for a 2,000-acre site where a regional landfill and economic generator can be built.

Formal contracts with the companies, along with a plan to close Nelson Gardens, will be voted on by the council next week.

Avila said he welcomed participation by the private sector. "It forces them to provide a great service at the lowest cost. I am a firm believer in competition," he said. "I see a slight increase (in user fees) but because of competition, it will not be a drastic increase."

The council decided to close the landfill because of the belief that a permit to expand Nelson Gardens wouldn't be granted by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, formerly known as the Texas Water Commission, because of environmental problems at the landfill and also to avoid paying higher operating costs because of new environmental regulations.

In related developments Friday:

- Anthony Grigsby, executive director of the resource conservation commission, lauded the city for making a "prudent and responsible" decision.

- Public Works Director John German said Nelson Gardens actually will close in roughly a week or two in order to provide time to apply a layer of topsoil measuring 1 foot in some areas and 2 feet in others, in keeping with current regulations.

- German met with about 40 landfill employees and assured them they would have jobs within the city structure after Nelson Gardens ceases operations.

In addition, letters are being written to about 20 cities or counties that deposit waste directly or by contract with private companies notifying them of the approaching closure of Nelson Gardens, German said.

"It will be up to them to find alternative landfill space," German said. In a telephone interview from Austin, Grigsby said a number of Texas cities and towns are opting to close landfills rather than face the stiffer, and costlier, federal environmental guidelines.

"It was a prudent and responsible thing for the city to do," Grigsby said. "No problems were insurmountable, but solving the deficiencies at Nelson Gardens would have required tremendous resources on the part of San Antonio."

The commission, in an internal memorandum obtained last month by the San Antonio Express-News, had faulted the landfill for groundwater contamination, a shortage of soil to cover buried trash, methane gas leaks and other problems.

Grigsby said the commission was encouraged by San Antonio's plans to enhance its recycling and composting programs and to develop a regional landfill.

Councilman Howard Peak said the city's focus, now more than ever, must be on establishing the regional landfill. "I don't like Nelson Gardens," Peak said. "It's served us well, but it's not a state-of-the-art landfill."

Councilman Juan Solis, who has voiced opposition to the proposed 75-cent fee, said he even more strongly objects to a higher fee, should one be contemplated.

Nevertheless, Solis said he understood the need for increased revenue because the solid-waste division is a financially self-supporting account. "It's got to break even," Solis said. landfills.

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Page: 1A

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