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Austin's sewage sludge could roll down to Fayette County

NEWS By [Asher Price](#) - American-Statesman Staff



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Highlights

Company bidding for Austin contract asks for state permission to apply sludge to Fayette County ranchland.

Some Fayette County residents readying for a fight.

Austin says such sludge reuse is in keeping with its zero-waste philosophy.

Austin's **sewage sludge** might soon be headed to ranchland 70 miles southeast of the city, near the Colorado River in eastern Fayette County.

Arkansas-based **Denali Water Solutions** is in the running for an Austin contract **to haul away the sludge**, the solid waste byproduct of the sewage treatment process, in a deal possibly worth millions of dollars.

"We are seeking permits in various counties to position our company to compete for various contracts, including Austin," Charlie Golden, a principal at Denali, which has operations across the country, said in an email to the American-Statesman.

But some in Fayette County say the 1,665-acre proposed site is the wrong place for sludge.

A city of Austin spokesman wouldn't say how many other bidders had responded to its call for contracts.



In this 2011 file photo, Jody Slagle, a compost and biosolids reuse manager, shows a handful of Dillo Dirt that is ... [Read More](#)

Since at least 2008, the city has contracted with Synagro to haul away sludge to ranchland near the community of Eagle Lake, a little over 100 miles to the southeast. But the current contract, which pays Synagro up to \$4.65 million per year, ends this year, and city officials said they wanted to see if they could get a better deal.

There are more companies out there providing similar services, and we wanted to see what options are out there for handling this, said Jane Burazer, assistant director for treatment at the Austin Water Utility.

The city produces up to 100,000 cubic yards of processed biosolids a year - enough to fill about 30 Olympic-sized swimming pools. As much as a third of that is combined with yard trimmings to produce the compost called Dillo Dirt; nearly all the rest is hauled away by Synagro, according to city officials.



Piles of yard trimmings are mixed with sewage solids to create Dillo Dirt at the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant in ... [Read More](#)

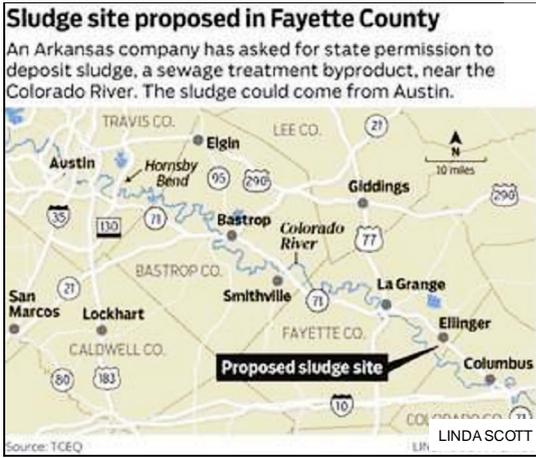
Travis County has no prohibition on sludge dumps, but they are subject to the county's solid waste siting ordinance.

In 2009, Synagro had applied to deposit sludge on farmland on three adjoining properties in eastern Travis County, but it withdrew the state and county applications in 2012 because of issues involving proximity to homes, odors and flood plain challenges, according to Jon White, director of natural resources and environmental quality for the county.

Layne Baroldi, director of regulatory affairs for Synagro, said the company had submitted a bid.

No hearings have been scheduled on Denali's state application, which was first reported by The Fayette County Record, but some residents in Fayette County have already announced their opposition.

They think it'll be an easy thing, that there won't be much opposition, said Pat Johnson, an artist and activist who lives in Fayetteville, about a half-dozen miles from the proposed site. But, she said, county residents stopped the expansion of a power plant, helped prevent the construction of toll roads and foiled a strip mine operation. The county doesn't take to being literally dumped on.



Map of sludge site proposed for Fayette County

County Judge Ed Janecka said as much as two-thirds of the proposed sludge site is in the flood plain.

Because of potential flood plain issues, Denali Golden said that additional mitigation measures may be required.

Janecka said, "Austin has a reputation of being environmentally conscious, but why are they having their sludge brought to another county?"

But city officials said the sludge, which can be used as fertilizer for hay production and other ranching activities, dovetails with Austin's philosophy of reusing resources.

Speaking generally about sludge application, she wouldn't speak to the specifics of any bid because the bids remain under review. Burazer said, "We're doing what we feel is in the best interest of the environment, and not just landfilling it."

What is sludge?

After waste is flushed down the toilet, mixing with drainage water from sinks and showers, it goes through a lengthy treatment: About 90 million gallons of wastewater a day is separated from 1 million gallons of solids at Austin's two sewage treatment plants.

The sewage solids are then pumped to the Hornsby Bend Biosolids Management Plant.

In a series of steps meant to mirror our own bodily process, the solids are then passed through anaerobic digesters for about 60 days; bacteria in the digesters kill most disease organisms and reduce the volume of material. (The anaerobic bacteria produce methane gas as a byproduct of digestion; it is collected and recycled to produce heat for warming the anaerobic digesters and electricity for the plant.)

Finally, the solids are further pressed to remove remaining water.

That product is known as sludge.

About the Author

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