

### **3D—Recommendation: Sewage Sludge Treatment and Zero Waste Goals**

#### **Background**

The sludge left over from Austin's wastewater treatment processes is currently dealt with in two ways. About a third of this material is composted with yard waste and brush into Dillo Dirt, and about two-thirds is "land applied" as fertilizer on agricultural land near College Station. Recently Austin Water Utility has been entertaining contracts to change this process, prompting one company to begin seeking land application permits in Fayette and Bastrop Counties. These permit applications sparked strong opposition, and when Austin Water Utility indicated that they would continue with their current vendor—Synagro—the permit applications were withdrawn.

Land applying Class B sludge—sludge that has been minimally treated and still has significant pathogenic contamination—poses significant threats to the environment, human health, and quality of life. Despite the fact that the process is approved by EPA, a growing body of evidence and chorus of opposition indicate that it is associated with health effects among nearby communities, persistent pollution of soils and waterways, as well as noxious odors and other harms. For this reason many Zero Waste advocates—including ARR Director Bob Gedert—do not consider Class B land application to be a Zero Waste strategy.

Since this recommendation was drafted there have been troubling new developments. Austin Water Utility is seeking approval from Council tomorrow—August 11—to negotiate and execute contracts with Synagro to "compost" Austin's sewage sludge into an agricultural product known as AllGro, and with Allen Crick to buy unscreened Dillo Dirt at a bargain price. AllGro appears to be closer to Class A sludge—a less pathogenic sludge product that still poses many of the environmental and quality of life impacts of Class B sludge—than to true compost. Furthermore, the very conditions that Austin Water Utility claims make composting Dillo Dirt difficult—the diversion of yard waste into our curbside composting system and marketing challenges—should undermine this process as well. Finally, the sale of unscreened Dillo Dirt threatens the future sustainability of that program, as the material screened out is recirculated into the compost system, a vital component to the process' success.

#### **What ZWAC is Being Asked to Do**

ZWAC is being asked to adopt a recommendation that simply clarifies to the City Council that Class B sludge land application is not a form of waste diversion. In light of the latest developments on this issue, however, ZWAC could take this opportunity to additionally advise Council regarding the two contracts under consideration tomorrow.

#### **Key Points**

- There has been, to date, no strategic process within city government to determine where all organic materials will be diverted to or disposed of in upcoming years.

- Committing major organic streams—i.e. all of the city’s sewage sludge—to an outside contractor prior to such a plan could mean that city departments lack the necessary ingredients for desired organic products in the future.
- The price at which the unscreened Dillo Dirt is being sold is a fraction of the cost other contractors have paid in the past.
- Class A sludge can be land applied without a permit and only minimal public notification.
- Austin Water Utility claims that Dillo Dirt is increasingly difficult to market, but AllGro is a lower quality product that they claim will be easily marketed. This seems contradictory.
- Austin Water Utility claims that Dillo Dirt will be difficult to produce when yard waste is diverted into curbside composting, but somehow Synagro will be able to compost sludge without this bulking agent. This does not make sense.
- The Austin City Council has never set a policy to end the award-winning and popular Dillo Dirt program.

### **TCE’s Position**

TCE recommends passage of this recommendation, but would amend it as follows:

- Strike the words “Class B” from the “Therefore Be It Resolved” clause,
- Addition of a clause reading “Be It Further Resolved that the Zero Waste Advisory Commission recommends that the Austin City Council take all necessary steps to sustain and expand the Dillo Dirt program after curbside composting is fully implemented,”
- Addition of a clause reading “Be It Further Resolved that the Zero Waste Advisory Commission recommends that the Austin City Council direct the City Manager to convene all necessary city departments to develop a strategic organic materials management plan prior to approving any contracts committing Austin Water Utility’s organic products to any vendor.”