

Recycled Reads Working Group Report

Working Group: Commissioners Aimee Finney, Patricia Dabbert, Deborah Pardo-Kaplan

June 24, 2019

Brief History:

Recycled Reads has been operating since 2008 as a centralized repository for processing and selling books weeded from the Austin Public Library collection and from private donations. It is an APL program that contributes to the City of Austin's Zero-Waste Initiative goals. To date, Recycled Reads has diverted more than 3000 tons of material from the landfill. Fifty percent of items received are weeded books from APL and 50 percent are public donations.

For a number of years, Recycled Reads sales have been stagnant while its donations have been increasing, allowing for a loss of \$200,000 annually. In 2017, Recycled Reads lost a major stipend/tonnage from Austin Resource Recovery (up to \$60,000)—which is only currently providing \$10,400 toward Recycled Reads 40 sustainability programs.

Prior to the end of the lease on Burnet Road, Recycled Reads will be re-envisioning itself. Staff desires to have all Austin citizens (opportunity for all its branches) buy used books and participate in recycling/reuse program. Recycled Reads had always intended to farm out its programming to branches.

1/31/19: Director Weeks sent a recommendation to Austin City Council for a sublease of Recycled Reads to Austin Creative Reuse, a Texas non-profit for approximately 4,758 square feet of RR for 36-months. The library commission and the public became aware of the recommendation without sufficient background and did not vote to support recommendation at the commission meeting in January.

A library commission working group was created to better understand the issues with Recycled Reads.

3/10/19: Working Group Meeting with Mindy Reed

The RR Working Group discussed with Mindy Reed a re-envisioning of Recycled Reads. **Mindy Reed said that Recycled Reads does not need the amount of space it currently uses for processing and sales. It can operate with 2500 square feet** (it currently has 7,675 sq. feet). It currently has 15 dedicated volunteers.

Recycled Reads used to share space with Literature Live and the Library Foundation, which is now at Faulk. Mindy Reed mentioned the idea of bringing Friends of the Library back to handle sales/processing. Mindy Reed thought that a future move to Faulk at end of lease was not a good idea because it would not be an ideal location for drop-offs or sales. Mindy Reed confirmed sales are flat due to too many of the same books coming in. She said she can't raise prices of books because people won't buy them at higher prices.

The working group and Reed discussed Austin Resource Recovery's discretionary fund and the previous director's stipend/tonnage to Recycled Reads. Discussion revolved around the idea of how Recycled Reads could become part of Austin's greater recycling community. **Seventy percent of Recycled Reads work can be done by another department** (i.e., Austin Resource Recovery), according to Mindy Reed. Mindy Reed would also like to develop a greater relationship with Goodwill. **She would like to see library acquisitions re-examined to reduce waste on the recycling end** (buying fewer copies of bestsellers).

4/1/19: Summary of meeting with Director Weeks, Mindy Reed, and John Gillum:

The working group met with Director Weeks, Mindy Reed, and John Gillum at Central. Director Weeks explained the status of Recycled Reads as follows:

With the loss of the sublease (Austin Creative Reuse) at Recycled Reads, the store will maintain its status quo. Since the city budget will be lean, the city might be looking to end all city leases and pressure will be put upon APL to look for other non-lease options in March 2022. Recycled Reads needs a rent-free central repository. The Faulk building will be under construction for the next four years and so it will not be ready for Recycled Reads to move into its space in 2022, according to Mr. Gillum. Still too early to know what will happen at the end of the lease: Recycled Reads may temporarily need to close from 2022-2023 until Faulk or another city building is available. At that time, RR might also need to halt donations. Regarding Austin Resource Recovery's stipend/tonnage to Recycled Reads, the city's legal department said it is not legal for ARR to grant RR such a stipend.

4/2/19 Alison Alter's office inquired with the Director of Austin Resource Recovery and Commissioner Pardo-Kaplan shared the response to Director Weeks for follow-up.

Email from Alter's office regarding Austin Resource Recovery:

“According to the legal department, Austin Resource Recovery cannot “give” money from the fee they collect from Austinites to another department. We determined that Austin Resource Recovery could use their money to run a program like Recycled Reads, but that RR would need to be a program of ARR, not the library. The legal department is very specific in the language they use about “giving” money to Austin Public Library so my [Alter's chief of staff] next step is whether ARR can “contract” with APL and that contract be with RR to divert books from the landfill. I fully expect that ARR could contract with an entity but that might need to be through an open bid process which means entities other than APL could potentially apply for the bid to run the program.”

4/29/19 Informal Discussion with Director Weeks prior to Library Commission

Meeting: Director Weeks spoke with the Interim Director of Austin Resource Recovery. A possible plan in 4-5 years is for Austin Resource Recovery to find a city location where both Recycled Reads and Austin Resource Recovery could work together.

May 2019

Director Weeks is awaiting the proposed budget cap (3.5%), the city's stance on leases, the needs of the community, and the cost of the lease, which will all contribute to a future decision about Recycled Reads.

May 10, 2019

The City of Austin posts a job looking for a new director for Austin Resource Recovery.

Suggested Recommendations:

For the City:

The Library Commission recommends that the city develop a plan for Recycled Reads to collaborate with Austin Resource Recovery, preferably by the time the lease ends in March 2022. If this is not possible, the Library Commission recommends that the City find a non-lease temporary/permanent location for Recycled Reads.

For Library Staff:

The Library Commission recommends that library staff communicate all plans regarding Recycled Reads to the Library Commission when major decisions are being discussed so we can update council members and allow for citizen communication on the subject at commission meetings. APL needs to evaluate the key function of Recycled Reads: Should RR continue acting as the "middleman" between the public (donations) /APL (withdrawals) and recycling establishments such as Goodwill or Austin Resource Recovery (since 40 percent of public donations and 75 percent of library withdrawals goes to Goodwill)?