



## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Mayor and City Council Members  
**From:** Ken Snipes, Director, Austin Resource Recovery (ARR)  
**Thru:** Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager  
**Subject:** Staff Recommendation on Requiring Organic Waste Collection at Additional Properties  
**Date:** January 6, 2023

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This memo responds to [Resolution No. 20191017-028](#), which directed the City Manager to make recommendations to City Council, after ARR completed a multifamily compost pilot, on possible amendments to the Universal Recycling Ordinance (URO) to include organic waste collection at commercial and multifamily properties, considering the interests of all relevant stakeholders.

ARR staff conducted a pilot to test composting (i.e., organic waste collection) at eight multifamily properties between March 2021 and February 2022. The pilot was originally scheduled to begin in March of 2020 but was delayed significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic followed by Winter Storm Uri. The scope of this pilot and subsequent stakeholder discussion focused on multifamily properties and did not include commercial properties.

Participating properties contracted for composting service through a private compost service provider of their choice, and ARR reimbursed fees for 6 months through a rebate. Staff collected data and feedback from the properties and compiled a report with findings (full report attached).

### **Multifamily Compost Pilot Findings**

Key findings from the pilot include:

- On average, 30% of residents were estimated to have used the provided composting service.
- Properties provided between 0.72 and 5 gallons of composting capacity per unit per week. This level of service was adequate to prevent bins from overflowing.
- Residents who responded to feedback surveys reported:
  - Always or very often using the available service
  - The educational material provided by ARR was useful, especially kitchen bins and compostable bags
- Property managers reported difficulty with:

- Engaging residents to use the composting service
  - Non-compostable materials being placed in the composting bins (i.e., contamination)
- Properties using compost carts were charged between \$0.80 - \$2.95 per unit per month for the collection service.

## **Public Stakeholder Meetings and Survey Findings**

Staff held three stakeholder meetings on October 6<sup>th</sup>, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, and November 14<sup>th</sup>; the ZWAC URO Committee also held two meetings on October 20<sup>th</sup> and December 1<sup>st</sup>. Stakeholders in attendance included representatives from the Austin Tenant's Council, Austin Apartment Association, multifamily property managers, multifamily residents, environmental advocacy organizations, and waste haulers.

Staff also developed an online survey for multifamily residents. This survey was open from November 2<sup>nd</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup>, and it was promoted through social media accounts, newsletters, and outreach events. The survey received 348 responses.

Stakeholder feedback collected through these meetings and surveys, included:

- Stakeholders felt that composting access needs to be convenient for multifamily residents to divert organic waste.
- Stakeholders expressed the need for complete education for residents to use composting services correctly, reduce contamination, and encourage participation. The education should not only include information on how to use compost services, but also the importance and impact of composting.
- Stakeholders are concerned about how costs may be passed on to residents. While the costs demonstrated in the pilot were not concerning, stakeholders fear actual costs may be inflated when passed on to residents if composting requirements are enacted.
- Contamination is a concern for property managers, residents, and organic material processors. There is a lower acceptance threshold for contamination in composting than in recycling, since improper materials like glass can ruin large quantities of finished product. To discourage contamination, processors charge fees if contamination is detected. These potential fees could increase the cost of composting service for multifamily properties in an unpredictable manner.
- Stakeholders expressed the desire for flexibility with compliance on any requirements, such as waivers for challenging situations like space constraints.
- Multifamily property managers expressed concerns with mandating composting services. Their concerns included cleanliness and pests, difficulty preventing contamination, space limitations, impacts on affordability, and lack of interest by residents.
- Multifamily residents responding to the survey:
  - Were overall in favor of the addition of composting services, but also expressed concerns with cleanliness, odors, and pests
  - Found that existing available composting options like drop-offs were not as convenient as curbside services offered at single-family homes
  - Expressed concerns with contamination and improper use of composting bins. Many mentioned this is a current concern with recycling services that are

required by the URO, and that this issue could continue or be exacerbated by adding composting

### **Staff Recommendation**

While ARR provides curbside composting service to all single-family homes, on-property access to composting is rare for residents living in multifamily communities. Establishing convenient and consistent landfill diversion expectations at work and home is a vital step to increasing educated participation of residents for all zero waste activities.

Most multifamily properties within Austin are serviced by private haulers and not the City of Austin. As a result, requiring composting services will add additional fees for property managers that will likely be passed to residents. These fees will vary depending on services levels and each property will have the opportunity to select a private hauler that best meets the needs of the property and its residents.

Additionally, there are expected to be differences in the quantity (volume) of material collected at a multifamily property compared to single family home. Department reviews of compost collected from single family homes indicate 75% of the material is yard waste (grass clippings, small branches, etc.). Multifamily residents should be expected to generate less yard waste. As a result, significant impacts to the city-wide diversion rate are not anticipated by staff should multifamily composting access be mandated.

Alternatives to mandating composting may be incentivized by existing rebate. The department offers a \$3000 rebate to support multifamily properties implementing composting services at their property. ARR currently provides consistent education and outreach to multifamily property managers and private haulers. In 2023, ARR intends to expand community outreach to include multifamily residents. Should a mandate not be pursued, outreach specific to multifamily compost can be considered.

Acknowledging the challenges, staff recommends a policy revision to Chapter 15-6 of the code of ordinances to establish standards of compost access for multifamily residents in Austin. Over half of Austin residents live within a multifamily property and Austin would be the first Texas municipality to establish composting access for these residents. Austin's vision is to be a national zero waste leader in the transformation from traditional waste collection to sustainable resource recovery. Establishing convenient and consistent access to landfill diversion for all residents is a foundational component of that effort.

Staff will present this report to the January 2023 Zero Waste Advisory Commission (ZWAC) meeting. If you have any questions or would like any additional information, please contact Gena McKinley at (512) 974-1915.

cc: Spencer Cronk, City Manager