

Combatting Dallas's Low Waste-Diversion Rate: Expanding Mandated Recycling to the Commercial Sector

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THESIS

To increase its low waste-diversion rate, the City of Dallas should accelerate the expansion of its multifamily residential recycling ordinance to include the commercial sector, its largest producer of waste.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

The City of Dallas's Local Solid Waste Management Plan strives to achieve "zero waste" (~84 percent diversion of waste from landfills) by 2040.¹ Dallas hoped to reach a 40 percent diversion rate by 2020, but in 2016 it had achieved only a 21 percent diversion rate,² 13 percent below the national average, and estimated waste-generation rates high enough to fill city landfills by 2043.³

The city relies on voluntary improvements in recycling participation to drive diversion-rate growth. Corey Troiani from Texas Campaign for the Environment (TCE) states that "Market-based incentives did not increase recycling participation in apartments, and similar incentives are still not working for businesses." A city recycling survey found no significant improvement in recycling rates over four years, showing the failure of voluntary efforts to meaningfully change recycling participation. In fact, recycling participation among Dallas Building Owners and Managers Association members has been diminishing over the past few years, from 84 percent in 2014 to 76 percent in 2017. A similar trend has occurred among Hotel Association of North Texas members, dropping from 61 percent to 55 percent over the same period of time. (Because companies that recycle are more likely to respond to such surveys, response bias may have actually resulting in an overestimate of recycling rates, meaning that recycling participation among businesses has likely decreased more than indicated.) Businesses comprise 65 percent of the Dallas waste flow, but with the exception of single-family and multifamily apartment complexes, which will be regulated starting in 2020, regulations do not require businesses to recycle. Yet, a 2018 Commercial Waste Audit found that nearly 77 percent of waste samples in selected commercial offices, and 90 percent in sampled hotels, were potentially recyclable.²⁵

In its Local Solid Waste Management Plan, Dallas set a strict timeline outlining a series of tasks that need to be completed in order to implement a universal recycling ordinance (URO) by 2020. The city cited the need to conduct stakeholder meetings to identify strategies for "maximal feasible recycle" at all multifamily buildings and commercial establishments, identified thresholds and milestones for participation in recycling programs, and vowed to evaluate the status of voluntary participation. But according to Troiani with the TCE, "The city has put little effort into collecting meaningful recycling data from commercial businesses," undermining any possibility of sticking to its timeline.

Low waste-diversion rates affect the entire community because of construction costs for new landfills, but they disproportionately affect minority and low-income communities because of where these landfills are located. Race is a primary predictor of landfill location, and Black communities are often the sites of "dumping grounds."⁷ In Dallas, the McCommas Bluff landfill, the largest landfill in the city, is located next to a Black community. A mapping overlay of landfill construction sites on a racial breakdown of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex indicates that landfills are overwhelmingly constructed in Hispanic and Black communities. Communities located near Dallas landfills have significantly lower per-capita incomes than other communities.⁸ The frequency of health complaints from communities near landfills closely correlates with the level of noxious fumes in the air, implicating landfill proximity as a factor in increased morbidity.⁹

TALKING POINTS

- Survey data show that voluntary participation is not enough to increase commercial recycling rates.
- The URO would allow companies to choose how they wish to implement recycling programs for themselves.
- UROs that offer businesses the flexibility to choose which materials to recycle and which recycling service contractor to use have shown significant increases in recycling rates.

THE POLICY IDEA

To boost commercial recycling rates, Dallas should accelerate implementation of a URO. Modeled after similar policies in Austin, Texas, and in Seattle and in other US cities, the URO requires companies to recycle but allows them to choose a contractor and decide which materials to collect. Each business must submit an annual diversion plan to the city specifying how it will increase recycling. In turn, the city provides support and advice to help companies achieve their recycling goals.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Currently, only 21 percent of Dallas commercial waste is recycled.¹¹ Austin implemented a URO in 2012, requiring all businesses and multifamily apartments to divert their organic and recyclable waste. Since it passed, 85 percent of Austin businesses and multifamily apartments have submitted waste-diversion plans to the city.¹⁴ The city's recycling rate increased from 38 percent¹² in 2010 to 42 percent in 2015.¹³ A URO will greatly increase Dallas's diversion rate if even a portion of the businesses that do not recycle begin diverting the 85 percent of recyclable waste that they add to landfills each year.

Requesting commercial recycling plans requires fewer governmental resources than mandating a specific diversion rate. Enforcement of the latter necessitates more funding and work hours. The former provides more freedom for businesses to set their own goals, decide how to adapt, and choose their own recycling pickup contractor. Because there are no penalties involved, businesses without the financial capacity to recycle are not in danger of fines; rather, they are coached on how to implement recycling within their means. Furthermore, although the addition of recycling pickup services may increase initial costs, long-term increases in recycling lead to decreased frequency of trash pickups and lower system-wide costs.¹⁵ In addition, increasing waste-diversion rates would decrease landfill deposition rates, slowing the adverse health effects that waste-processing sites pose to nearby minority and low-income communities.^{16,17,18} Increasing recycling rates also creates living-wage jobs; recycling collection alone creates more than 2.5 times as many jobs, requiring various levels of skill and in multiple locations within a city, as landfill disposal does.¹⁹

NEXT STEPS

The implementation of a URO depends on raising awareness for the issue among stakeholders. Developing support for the commercial aspect of the URO will continue and augment five years of collaboration between TCE and major commercial interest groups. Bimonthly meetings will bring small businesses and other trade associations into these discussions. Including other stakeholders, such as recycling pickup services and residents who live near landfills, is important. We will create and present GIS prediction maps of commercial recycling patterns before and after URO implementation, gathered through surveys of local businesses. Recommendations from all stakeholder meetings and mapping visuals will be sent to Dallas City Council Committee on Quality of Life, Arts & Culture committee, the entity in charge of drafting the eventual URO.

Advocacy is integral to successfully implementing the policy. All information will be communicated to the public as op-eds in the Dallas Morning News and other influential news sources. We will work with our campus's Green Initiative and Sustainability Club to further promote our idea. Volunteer support from the UT Dallas Office of Sustainability will be essential to passing this Dallas ordinance. With these recommendations and data in hand, the Dallas City Council should be well positioned to draft and then pass a URO.

KEY FACTS

- Dallas hotels, apartments, and office buildings only diverted 14 percent of their waste in 2015, and only 44 percent of those surveyed had recycling services.²⁰
- Dallas's diversion rate was 21 percent in 2016, despite the city setting a goal of 90 percent diversion by 2040.¹⁰
- Austin's URO has helped it reach a diversion rate of 42 percent, an increase from 38 percent^{22, 23}

ENDNOTES

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