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Council Votes on Trash Clash

BY LEE NICHOLS, NOVEMBER 26, 2004, NEWS

The City Council last Thursday approved a staff recommendation to enter into negotiations with **IESI Corp.** to manage the money-losing **city landfill** off of FM 812, just south of Bergstrom Airport. The vote – over the objections of environmental activists, a competing landfill owner, and the city's **Solid Waste Advisory Commission** – was 5-2, with Jackie Goodman and Raul Alvarez voting no.

Leading up to the council meeting, **Texas Campaign for the Environment**, led by director **Robin Schneider**, had posted complaints on its Web site (www.texasenvironment.org) that the FM 812 landfill was problem-plagued, including a collapse in 1991 that spilled waste into nearby Onion Creek. TCE also charged that IESI has not been properly maintaining the adjacent dump that it currently operates for Travis Co. The environmental group alleges that that dump has been attracting buzzards, possibly indicating that it is accepting household garbage or other "putrescible" (in short, stinky) waste, which it is not authorized to do. Those buzzards, TCE says, pose a risk to planes at Bergstrom. The group also charged that IESI has been underpaying required fees to the city, making it ineligible for a city contract.

A week before the council meeting, the SWAC recommended against the contract, swayed by many of those arguments. At the meeting itself, **Texas Disposal Systems** owner **Bob Gregory** – a landfill operator respected by environmentalists, and an unsuccessful competitor for this contract – and his engineer Robert Kier repeated many of the same charges to the council. **Jeff Peckham**, a vice-president for IESI, rebutted those claims by saying that the FM 812 landfill has been regularly inspected by the **Texas Commission on Environmental Quality**, and more recently by city staff, and has a clean record and has never been subject to an enforcement action. He emphasized that the city landfill, if taken over by IESI, absolutely would not accept putrescible waste, and that the city could save \$32 million under IESI's proposals. He also strongly denied that IESI had ever missed any city fee payments, and said that IESI is properly covering its waste and could not be causing a buzzard problem. A city staffer also said that the airport had suffered no buzzard problems from the dump.

Noting that the vote was only to enter negotiations with the company, not to actually approve a contract, Council Member **Betty Dunkerley** moved to approve the item with the provision that city staff stipulate detailed environmental and wildlife control plans, and to include an out clause in case the city later decides to close the landfill. Goodman expressed concerns that the contract might not fit in with future long-range waste disposal plans and was joined by Alvarez in voting no. Chief Financial Officer **John**

Stephens said a contract could be brought back to council by February at the earliest.

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