

April 21, 2014  
Mayor Annise Parker  
901 Bagby St.  
Houston, TX 77002

Dear Mayor Parker:

Our letter addresses the release of the City's Request for Proposals (RFP) and recent statements you have made regarding the "One Bin for All" proposal. The statement to which we are referring was first broadcast on KUHF 88.7 FM radio program "Houston Matters" Monday, March 31, and has since been repeated. We represent a broad constituency who questions assumptions inherent in the proposal, the technology under consideration, its associated risks and costs, and the very process by which the City's future waste program is currently being evaluated.

During the program, you stated that the benefit of the "One Bin For All" would be, "the chance to go from a 10% recycling rate to a 70% recycling rate by going to one bin, even if your materials aren't worth as much, the volume of the recycling goes up so astronomically that the economies of scale are tremendous."

Both the RFP and previously released Request for Qualification (RFQ) call for waste to fuel technologies, including gasification, catalytic conversion and anaerobic digestion, that are clearly distinct from "recycling." There has never been a mixed waste processing "one bin" facility anywhere in the world that has reached a 70% recycling rate, and "One Bin for All" would heavily rely on waste to fuel as a means to reach the desired "diversion" rate of 75%. Expensive and polluting, waste to fuel methods are completely unnecessary to divert 75% of waste from landfills and will create new emissions and economic threats for our City. Alternatively, we believe diverting 75% of the City's waste through source separated recycling and compost could create tens of thousands more jobs in the Houston area, conserve resources, reduce emissions and stop pollutants from entering our environment while creating maximum revenue for the City.

During the program, you said, "For some reason that escapes me, there is one environmental organization that attacks [the theory that we could do one bin recycling] and says that it reduces the value of recyclable materials, and I would agree with that." We have some point-by-point responses:

1) Many local groups have vocally challenged the mixing of trash and recycling; these include Texas Campaign for the Environment, Sierra Club Houston Regional Group, NAACP Houston Branch, T.E.J.A.S., Texans Together, and the San Jacinto River Coalition. At least 19,000 letters have been sent to the Office of the Mayor and City Council from concerned Houstonians.

Globally renowned environmentalists have also denounced the proposal. During the SXSW Eco 2013 conference, national Sierra Club CEO, Michael Brune, said: "'One Bin for All' calls for getting rid of all separate recycling

collection in Houston, which means people there will get a lot less value from their recyclable materials. Facilities like the one they want to build have a history of financial, management, operational and other failures, and the incineration projects they want to pursue pollute the environment. This is a bad idea. Houston needs to join other cities in Texas and across the world in adopting a long-term Zero Waste plan which will truly maximize stewardship of their resources.”

Annie Leonard, director of the Story of Stuff Project, said “I’ve been hearing about magic machines for separating trash and recycling for 20 years, and none of them have worked. Even if they were real, I’d still oppose these ‘One Bin’ waste schemes because throwing everything in the same bin perpetuates our current mindless relationship with stuff. Houston and every other community needs to change the game and pursue a Zero Waste strategy which provides jobs, reduces pollution and offers real solutions to the unsustainable culture of consumption and disposal which has failed us for so long.”

Clearly, more than “one environmental group” have come forward to raise legitimate issues, point out inconsistencies, and especially, promote the Zero Waste option.

2) Aside from the obvious problem of contaminating recyclables which you recognize, groups proposing Zero Waste alternatives to the “One Bin” program have specifically flagged gasification, catalytic conversion and anaerobic digestion as problematic. We regard the first two as forms of incineration that have high potential to degrade air quality in the neighborhoods where they are to be sited and where there are already polluting facilities threatening public health.

Incineration is a risky form of energy production and simultaneously one of the least efficient means of waste disposal. Gasification of solid waste has never been successfully implemented in the U.S. and has a poor track record overseas, producing cancer causing emissions and toxic ash which must be disposed of in landfills. Gasification or catalytic conversion is expected to cost over \$100 per ton and would require a long-term contract, causing us to miss out on opportunities for future innovations in recycling and waste reduction. Incineration also competes with recycling, reuse and waste reduction, drives further extraction of raw materials and creates toxic byproducts such as bottom ash and slag, laced with dioxins and other toxic materials. Thousands of people work in the recycling industry in this City, including public employees. The proposed incineration methods would eliminate many of those jobs if subsidized by the City, as the “One Bin for All” RFP proposes. In addition, anaerobic digestion, while not nearly as polluting as incineration, is simply unproven compared to source-separated compost collection, which other cities are doing, as you said.

We believe that evaluation of the “One Bin for All” proposal has not included adequate public participation. The Advisory Committee that has been announced has been constituted entirely too late in the process and should have been invited to examine the proposals during the RFQ process if not earlier. No representatives from local groups who have voiced concerns about the “One Bin for All” have been chosen to serve on the Advisory Committee. To our knowledge there are no environmental justice representatives on the Advisory Committee to

provide valuable feedback and guidance on equitable solutions to our waste. Instead of coming together to look at the “One Bin for All” proposal in isolation, a more effective Advisory Committee would look at all alternatives to the commingling and incineration of waste, including the Zero Waste option of using separate recycling and composting containers, improving education and incentives, and committing to reduce waste.

We applaud the City's intended expansion of the big, green recycling bins to all houses. Now let's set goals for landfill diversion even higher than 75% and get a plan in place to reach it in the next few decades through recycling, compost, reuse and waste reduction. And let's include apartments, condos, businesses, etc. We urge the City to set up a genuinely representative Solid Waste and Recycling Board to look at realistic options for Houston to implement in the long term, including the Zero Waste alternative, and to include real public participation in this process.

Sincerely,

**Houston Peace and Justice Center**

Bill Crosier, President

**Sierra Club Houston Regional Group**

Art Browning, Chair

Evelyn Merz, Environmental Chair

Frank Blake, Recycling Chair

**Houston Environmental Justice Climate Action**

**Network**

Dr. Robert Bullard,

Dr. Denae King,

Nekya Young

**San Jacinto River Coalition**

Jacquelyn Young, Director

Chris Schillaci, Organizer

**NAACP Houston Branch**

Rev. Reginald Lillie, President

**Texas Environmental Justice Advocacy Services**

**(T.E.J.A.S.)**

Bryan Parras

**Public Citizen TX**

Tom “Smitty” Smith

**Texas Campaign for the Environment**

Robin Schneider, Executive Director

Melanie Scruggs, Houston Program Director

**Eco-Cycle International**

Eric Lombardi, Executive Director

**Federal International, Inc | Recycling and Waste Solutions**

Della Barbato

**H.C. Clark, Ph.D.**, Former member Municipal Solid Waste Management & Resource Recovery Advisory Council for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality,  
(representing the public)

## Open Letter from SXSW Eco Presenters Opposing “One Bin for All” and Supporting a Zero Waste Houston

Mayor Parker and Council:

As environmental activists, entrepreneurs and thought leaders invited to present at SXSW ECO, we believe that the City of Houston should not abandon separating recyclables from trash, and so **we oppose the City’s “One Bin for All” proposal that would have trash, recyclables and yard waste all mixed in one collection bin to be sorted at a “dirty MRF” (materials recovery facility).**

**We cannot continue to waste resources on a massive scale and create a sustainable world at the same time.** We must work to eliminate waste by redesigning our products, reducing unnecessary consumption and developing more durable, reusable products across the board. Houston’s proposal will make these goals more difficult to reach by taking conscious thought out of the process of discarding materials and promoting a “just throw it away” culture. This undermines the very mechanisms which incentivize source reduction and reuse.

We are also concerned that the City of Houston’s preferred solution to the intractable problem of contamination posed by dirty MRF systems is to use incineration-in-disguise methods of turning waste into expensive electricity and dangerous air pollution. The Request for Qualifications released by the City this summer states that “gasification” and “catalytic conversion” will be considered. These technologies are defined as incineration by the EPA and European Union, and are proven to release dioxins, furans and persistent organic pollutants into the atmosphere. These facilities have had a long history of operational and environmental problems. **The last thing Houston needs is to turn its trash into air pollution.**

We are especially concerned that Houston officials have proposed siting this facility at an existing landfill or transfer station, which are all located in predominantly minority communities. In essence, what the City is proposing is an **invitation to injustice.**

It would be inappropriate to simply reject a policy without offering alternatives, and the City of Houston is correct to acknowledge the problems that their current recycling shortcomings are causing. **The solution, however, is to continue the process of deploying single-stream curbside recycling bins to every household in the city, and to match this with a comprehensive, long-term Zero Waste plan** that can guide policymakers over the next generation towards a concrete goal for maximum waste diversion away from landfills and burning. Such diversion would include recycling and composting, but would also focus on reuse; policies which encourage us to rethink the way we create, consume and discard our goods will reduce waste, not policies which encourage us to throw all discards in one bin without a second thought.

Houston is one of the most diverse, vibrant and exciting cities in the country and a world-class center of commerce and innovation – it deserves policies which reflect that spirit. The “One Bin for All” proposal will undermine any real chance for sustainable waste diversion in Houston. **We urge the City of Houston to set this idea aside and to focus instead on a comprehensive Zero Waste plan which will actually accomplish the goals that this proposed facility cannot reach.**

## Signed By

Michael Brune  
CEO, Sierra Club

Annie Leonard  
Story of Stuff

Michael Green  
Executive Director, Center for Environmental Health

Marcus Eriksen  
Co-Founder, 5Gyres

Daniella Dimitrova Russo  
Co-Founder and Executive Director  
Plastic Pollution Coalition

Charlie McCabe  
Director of Public Programs  
Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway Conservancy

Kari Banta  
Sierra Club

Dustin Fedako  
CEO, East Side Compost Pedallers

Jennifer Walker  
Sierra Club

Jesse Prentice-Dunn  
Sierra Club

Yaira A. Robinson  
Cedar Park, TX

Brent Davies  
VP, Forests and Ecosystem Services, EcoTrust

Martha Honey, Ph.D.  
Co-Director, Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)

Chuck Flink  
Durham, NC

Amar Pradhan  
CTO, Fluitec Wind

Pam Bixby Losefsky  
Austin, TX

Nathan Phillips  
Boston University

Cody Nystrom  
Richmond, VA

Rev. Lennox Yearwood  
Founder and CEO, Hip Hop Caucus

George Cofer  
2013 "Best Environmentalist," Austin Chronicle

Beth Terry  
Author, My Plastic Free Life

Lawrence Grodeska  
San Francisco, CA

Annie Longworth  
CEO, Saatchi and Saatchi S

Anna Clark  
President, EarthPeople LLC

## Industry Experts Urge Houston to Abandon “One Bin” Dirty MRF

3/14/2013

Mayor Annise Parker  
Houston City Hall  
901 Bagby Street  
Houston, TX 77002

Mayor Parker:

We are writing to express deep skepticism towards your “One Bin for All Proposal,” and to recommend a different path towards higher diversion rates for Houston. While we are pleased to see one of America’s biggest cities adopt a commitment to waste diversion, we, the undersigned waste industry experts, must notify you of our experience and understanding of these types of facilities. This proposal to eliminate the need to separate household discards into trash, recycling and organic bins and bags, and to invest in building a facility which would mechanically separate these materials is unlikely to be successful.

1. Based on our understanding of the proposal, the facility the City of Houston plans to build offers no new technological improvements or equipment. Rather, it relies on the same equipment and technologies already employed across the globe. Additionally, the facility itself is not new. Similar facilities have been built in previous years and have been called by those in the industry “dirty MRFs”, or dirty Materials Recovery Facility. In most cases, the operation of “dirty MRFs” has been abandoned in favor of single-stream recycling because “dirty MRF” facilities have historically produced low quality recyclables and failed to deliver high diversion rates due to high contamination of recyclables. The “dirty” in “dirty MRF” comes from the fact that these facilities have to sort recyclables from other kinds of discards including dirty diapers, food and other materials.

2. A high level of contamination among recyclables is inevitable with a one-bin, dirty MRF system because individuals are placing wet organic matter in one bin with valuable recyclable commodities. Fiber commodities, like paper, are the best example of a normally high value commodity being degraded by wet organic matter diminishing its value in the marketplace and making it difficult to sell resulting in a high percentage of fiber commodities being sent to landfills for disposable.

3. The dirty MRF as proposed by the City of Houston is expected to rely primarily on mechanical separation and sorting using optical scanners to distinguish commodities from garbage and sort those commodities appropriately. However, facilities have used optical scanners for presorting for quite some time and have found that although they help the sorting process, optical scanners are no replacement for human labor. Optical scanners are an aid, not a replacement for humans and if relied on as the primary method of sorting, a great amount of recyclable material will be missed and will be disposed of in a landfill.

4. Houston also proposes to have residents put used electronics in the trash to be sorted out at a dirty MRF. As with other recyclables, it is far better for electronics to be separated out and be handled by specialized electronics recyclers. The reuse potential would probably be eliminated by a dirty MRF and the potential to salvage components such as hard drives for resale would also be lost. Workers would also be at increased risk of exposure to toxic substances and heavy metals like lead and mercury.

The few dirty MRFs that have been built in the United States have not yielded impressive results. In San Diego County, for example, they spent \$120 million on a dirty MRF in the early 1990s only to dismantle the facility after three years. Even with the latest technology, once materials are mixed it is very difficult to separate them, but unfortunately the waste industry has seen more than its share of companies promising simple solutions that often turn out to be too good to be true. In the meantime, many communities miss the opportunity to put in place the needed infrastructure and provide the public education that will move communities towards high-performing reuse and recycling systems.

The intention of this letter is to highlight a few potential problems that we, as waste and recycling industry experts, see with the facility that the City of Houston has proposed. Because of these potential problems, we remain skeptical that such a facility will deliver the high diversion rates claimed.

Thank you,

Amy Perlmutter  
**Perlmutter Associates**  
Cambridge, MA

Darien Ross  
**Republic Services**  
Houston, TX

Eddie Lott  
**Recycle Revolution**  
Dallas, TX

Eric Lombardi  
**Ecocycle**  
Boulder, CO

Gerry Acuna  
**Tri-Recycle**  
Austin, TX

Thad Davis  
**Recycle Revolution**  
Dallas, TX

Karly Jo Dixon  
**Ecology Action of Texas**  
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Tim Brownell  
**Eureka Recycling**  
Minneapolis, MN

Kerry Getter  
**Balcones Resources**  
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Pete Cole  
**Green Recycling Center**  
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Tom Rutz  
**GreenThumb Composting, LLC**  
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Rick Anthony  
**Richard Anthony Associates**  
San Diego, CA

Mark Austin  
**We CAN Recycle**  
Houston, TX

# Leading National Zero Waste and Recycling Advocates Urge Houston to Abandon “One Bin” Dirty MRF

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901 Bagby Street  
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Mayor Parker:

We are writing to express deep skepticism towards your “One Bin for All Proposal,” and to recommend a different path towards higher diversion rates for Houston. While we are pleased to see one of America’s biggest cities adopt a commitment to waste diversion, we, the undersigned recycling and Zero Waste advocates and innovators, must notify you of our experience and understanding of these types of facilities. This proposal to eliminate the need to separate household discards into trash, recycling and organic bins and bags, and to invest in building a facility which would mechanically separate these materials is unlikely to be successful.

While you have been proud to identify this idea as “brand new—never before implemented,” in reality it is—at best—a new angle on a technology which has been tried over and over again with no real success. What your office is calling “One Bin for All” is more commonly called a “dirty MRF” (pronounced “murf,” a Materials Recovery Facility). These facilities generate low quality recyclables, landfill large quantities of otherwise recyclable goods and increasingly rely upon advanced disposal techniques, such as Refuse Derived Fuel and/or anaerobic digestion in order to meet their landfill diversion goals. The facility in California, which is often pointed to as an earlier version of what is being proposed in Houston, achieves 35% recovery of residential waste. Of this 35%, 9% goes to landfills as daily cover, as allowable under California law; only 26% of household waste is actually being recycled.

Historically, Houston has not been a leader in recycling. This proposal would, likely, continue to delay the effort to get Houston on the path towards leadership. Houston still does not provide basic curbside recycling for all city serviced single family households. Presently 28% of Houston residents with city waste services have single-stream recycling carts, 27% have dual-stream recycling bins, and 45% have no recycling at all. Additionally, few office buildings have recycling available to employees, only a handful of multi-family housing complexes offer recycling to tenants, recycling bins in public spaces are practically nonexistent, and the number of drop-off sites throughout the city is declining.

In this grant proposal the City of Houston stated that “citizens have been educated for years to separate their materials, but it has not worked,” but education in the absence of opportunity cannot be expected to yield results. The City also states that “the mayor is constantly besieged by citizens to bring recycling to their neighborhoods.” The solution to Houston’s low recycling rates is not an expensive gamble on an experimental materials recovery facility similar to those proven ineffective in other communities. The solution is investment in a fiscally sound curbside recycling program, which provides all Houston residents with equal opportunity to recycle, and other efforts to reduce, reuse, and recycle discards.

Across the country, we see that most people will recycle when they know that they are creating jobs, conserving resources, slowing climate change and saving energy by putting their recyclables in a separate bin or cart. The City of Houston needs to invest in providing the infrastructure and education for simple recycling before giving up on its residents and moving onto technologies we know are less effective in terms of resource recovery.

We were also disturbed to learn that the city would consider encouraging your residents to put electronic waste (used computers, monitors and televisions) into a trash bin. Electronics are a good example of how source-separating this discard stream can lead to reuse and recycling and create good jobs in the process. A new study by the Coalition for American Electronics Recycling found that on average a new job is created for every 173,000 pounds sent to an electronics recycler. Considering that in Texas, it is estimated that 148,000 tons of electronic waste is disposed of each year, that’s about 1,700 jobs being thrown away. Additionally, putting electronic waste and other discards containing toxic, as well as valuable, material in a dirty MRF creates dangerous conditions and wastes resources. For example, one Cathode Ray Tube monitor contains between four and eight pounds of lead. If a CRT monitor were to break in transit as more and more garbage, recyclables, and electronic waste were piled on top workers would risk lead exposure.

We are encouraged to hear the city reframe your attitude towards “waste” as a resource to be utilized, but if you are serious about this you will pursue reduction, reuse, recycling, composting and other legitimate Zero Waste practices and technologies. There are many areas for innovations that the City of Houston could be seek funding to pursue:

- Expansion or improving curbside recycling and new public education methods to reach out to the city’s diverse communities in both single and multi-family dwellings
- Increasing their existing separation and composting efforts on yard waste to include other organics and building a diversified food waste infrastructure that puts it to its highest and best use – feeding people, then animals and then soil through composting
- Expanding reuse, recycling and composting for institutions and businesses and in public places
- Developing creative solutions for Construction and Demolition waste
- Building a resource recovery park where reuse, recycling, composting and other diversion activities for household hazardous waste and swap shops can all take place in one location

Praise is due to the City of Houston for recognizing the value wasted by discarding our resources into landfills and/or incinerators, and to the Bloomberg Foundation for seeking to encourage waste diversion. However, it is time for Houston to go back to the drawing board and come up with real solutions as opposed to investing in operations known to undermine real diversion and Zero Waste.

Thank you,

Tyson Sowell  
**Texas Campaign for the Environment**  
Houston, TX

Annie Leonard  
**The Story of Stuff Project**  
Berkeley, CA

George P. Dreckman  
**City of Madison, Streets Division**  
Madison, WI

Matt Prindiville  
**Product Policy Institute**  
Rockland, ME

Rick Anthony  
**Zero Waste San Diego**  
San Diego, CA

Susan Hubard  
**Nothing Left to Waste**  
St. Paul, MN

Gary Liss  
**Gary Liss and Associates**  
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Tom “Smitty” Smith  
**Public Citizen – Texas Office**  
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Mike Ewall  
**Energy Justice Network**  
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Greg Good  
**Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE)**  
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Peter Anderson  
**Center for a Competitive Waste Industry**  
Madison, WI

JD Porter  
**Central Texas Zero Waste Alliance**  
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Stacy Guidry  
**Austin Zero Waste Alliance**  
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**Resa Dimino**  
Albany, NY

Gretchen Brewer  
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San Diego, CA

Mark Muhich  
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Paul Connett, PhD  
**American Environmental Health Studies Project**  
Canton, NY

Rod Muir  
**Sierra Club Canada**

**Mercedes Brugh**  
Logansport, IN

Gerry Acuna  
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Austin, TX

Gary Liss, Ruth Abbe, Monica Wilson, Linda Christopher, Gretchen Brewer, and Richard Anthony  
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