

At last, city picks recycling contractor Minneapolis council spends 2 more hours sorting through options

Rochelle Olson, Star Tribune

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Only after a suggestion that the winner be picked at random in a drawing did the Minneapolis City Council make a decision Friday to begin negotiations on a recycling contract with Browning-Ferris Industries.

BFI currently hauls city recyclables and submitted a bid last fall for the new contract along with Eureka of St. Paul and Recycle America Alliance, a subsidiary of Waste Management Inc.

The 13-member City Council, however, continued to be severely split - as it had been for weeks - over which company to select. At one point weeks ago, a council committee sent all three bidders back to their calculators, instructing them to return with their final bids. On roll-call votes Friday, the council rejected each recycler individually. Eureka and BFI each got six votes, one shy of the seven-vote majority needed for approval. Recycle America got only two votes.

Then the council started voting for the recyclers as ranked packages.

Several efforts failed before the council settled 7-6 on a package that ranked BFI first, Recycle America second and Eureka third. That means that if negotiations fail with BFI, the council's staff will negotiate with Recycle America and then Eureka.

Unlocking a deadlock

The council came to agreement on the package only because Scott Benson, who originally voted against the line-up, switched sides.

Voting for the arrangement with Benson were Lisa Goodman, Don Samuels, Barbara Johnson, Sandy Colvin Roy, Natalie Johnson Lee and Robert Lilligren.

Voting against were Barret Lane, Dean Zimmermann, Gary Schiff, Paul Zerby, Dan Niziolek and Paul Ostrow.

Benson's move, after more than two hours of discussion, broke what looked like a deadlock.

All sorts of efforts failed.

Schiff, in what he called an attempt to save the council from further embarrassment, unsuccessfully tried to postpone the decision for a couple of weeks.

At one point, Lane said drily, "Maybe we should ask if anybody wants a contract with us."

Goodman shot back: "Maybe we should just put all the names in a hat."

Others suggested various unorthodox and unprecedented methods for choosing a major city contractor. Ostrow asked, "Is Solomon in our midst?"

But as the debate dragged on, Benson scratched out possible combinations with his colleagues. Although his first choice was Recycle America and his second was Eureka,

his only choice for breaking the impasse was to vote for BFI, because it was the only one he had voted against.

"Clearly, we weren't going to end up with a contract unless somebody switched," he said. "It was time for us to move along."

The current recycling contract will expire at the end of the month. Benson said that all three recycling options had benefits and that any one of them would bring the city more money than it collects under the current contract.

But for Benson, no one appeared willing to move his or her vote.

The council's ultimate decision bucked recommendations from the Public Works and Finance departments. The staff had recommended negotiating with Recycle America because of a unique aspect of its offer that would allow the city to fix the prices for newspaper and aluminum.

But several council members favored Eureka because of its local ties, nonprofit status and commitment to the environment.

North Side ties

Those who favored BFI included the trio of council members from north Minneapolis, where the company's plant is located. Johnson, Samuels and Johnson Lee noted the company's commitment to the community and practice of hiring at-risk youths.

Mayor R.T. Rybak, who had been at the meeting earlier, was not present for the vote or the debate. Mayoral aide Peter Wagenius said the mayor had another appointment and that his previous statement on the issue stood.

Earlier in the week, Rybak didn't specifically express a preference, but said, "All things being equal, I like to buy local."

Recycle America is a subsidiary of Houston-based trash-hauling giant Waste Management. BFI is owned by Allied Waste Industries Inc., based in Scottsdale, Ariz.

"We are obviously disappointed we weren't selected, but I have to congratulate the City Council for working through this issue. They did come up with a workable solution at the end. That's what's important," said Steven Dunn, Recycle America's district manager.

When asked if she had comment as she left the meeting, Eureka's Susan Hubbard said, "Not really."

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