

Significant improvements seen in recycling and reductions in plastic bag use

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Austin City Council Member Lee Leffingwell and representatives of Keep Austin Beautiful, the Texas Retailers Association and local retailers announced preliminary results of a year-long effort to encourage Austinites to shop with reusable bags, recycle plastic bags and reduce the number of plastic bags they use.

Data collected from participating retailers, HEB, Randall's, Wal-Mart, Walgreen's, and Target, indicate that Austinites who shopped at those stores recycled about 20 percent more bags at the stores during the first half of 2008 than they did during the first half of 2006 between Jan. 1 through June 30 of each year. The stores also reported that they supplied customers with more than 40 percent fewer plastic bags at their stores during the first half of 2008 than they did during the first half of 2006. And in the first half of 2008, the stores supplied customers with 443,227 reusable bags—more than one bag for every two Austin residents, according to population estimates.

"I am excited about the preliminary results from the campaign; it demonstrates a commitment from stakeholders and citizens to reduce the volume of plastic bags that are going to the landfill," said William E. Rhodes, P.E. Director of Solid Waste Services. "The department will continue to actively support this campaign as it moves forward."

Highlights of the awareness campaign include the creation of a campaign logo and a reusable bag designed by a local artist to raise awareness in the community, a campaign kick-off event, an art contest to involve youth in the effort, a reusable bag day promotion and the development of a campaign website to provide information about where to buy reusable bags and recycle plastic bags.

The Design-a-Bag Contest invited all youth in the Greater Austin Area in grades K-12 to participate by decorating a canvas bag with an environmental theme, receiving 750 entries with winning artwork exhibited at City Hall.

During a campaign kick-off event, Austinites brought five plastic shopping bags for recycling in exchange for a free reusable bag. More than 1,000 reusable bags were given away. The event featured interactive art, a dance performance and kids' environmental activities, all with a focus on reusable bags and plastic bag recycling.

The reusable bag day promotion asked all Austinites to shop with a reusable bag on a specific day. The promotion made a big visual impact in Austin, and raised awareness about how easy and affordable it is to shop with reusable bags. Parents and kids were also invited to participate by decorating a reusable bag participating stores around Austin.