



## → Manmade mountains by CHRISTOF SPIELER

Once it is picked up at the curb, our trash is far from our minds. But it doesn't actually go very far. There are several dozen landfills in city limits, and more all over the region. In the flat coastal plain, these manmade mountains aren't hard to find if you look.

Houston's trash collection is an odd mix of socialism and capitalism. Unlike most Americans, Houstonians don't pay trash bills. The city's Solid Waste Management Department gets its

budget from general revenues. But that service only extends to the roughly half of Houstonians who live in single-family houses and complexes of less than four units. Larger complexes have to contract for their trash service. Thus, apartment and condominium residents subsidize single-family residents with their property and sales taxes.

Once the trash has been picked up, though, the free market rules. The City of Houston does not operate a

landfill, only three transfer stations, where neighborhood trash trucks drive up a ramp and dump their loads into a huge bin from which larger transfer trucks are loaded for trips to privately-owned landfills. Disposal is up for bids. Whichever firm charges the least is paid to pick up the trash from the transfer stations and bring it to any permitted landfill they choose. Waste is a big (and recession-resistant) business. The nation's largest trash company, Waste

Management, which is headquartered in Downtown Houston, just reported \$2.95 billion in quarterly revenue

Perhaps due to the easy availability of landfills, Houston has been a laggard in recycling; only 10,000 single family homes are served with a pilot curbside recycling program, and public recycling bins are uncommon.