

Public works best for solid waste

Canadians want to live in environmentally-sustainable communities. Publicly-delivered solid waste and recycling services are the most effective way to reach the goal of “zero waste” communities.

There is no consistent evidence that contracted-out waste collection is cheaper or more efficient. The experience of several Ontario municipalities reinforces these findings:

- In 2008, Toronto’s per-tonne garbage collection costs were below the provincial average for major cities, despite having one of the highest rates of diversion from landfill. (Diversion is more expensive than regular garbage disposal).¹
- In 2006, the City of Ottawa contracted in garbage and blue box services for one of its six zones. Three years later, the city auditor found the contracted-in services had saved more than \$3.8 million.²
- Since amalgamation, the City of Hamilton has divided garbage collection in half between public employees and private contractors. Public operation has consistently been more cost-effective, despite covering the more labour-intensive and logistically-challenging areas of the city.³

In addition, contracting out garbage services means municipalities lose the control and flexibility to introduce new waste diversion programs like recycling and composting.

Cities are keeping it public

Recently, some municipalities have brought solid waste services back in-house. Others have rejected contracting out:

- In 2009, Port Moody, British Columbia, brought solid waste and recycling services back in-house after 10 years of private service. The contractor provided such poor service that the city had to send municipal employees out to clean up their mess and missed pickups.
- In 2008-2009, Peterborough decided not to contract out solid waste and recycling.
- In 2009, directors of the Skeena Queen Charlotte Regional District in British Columbia voted to keep their garbage services public, after considering contracting out.
- In 2006, Toronto contracted in former City of York garbage and recycling operations. The city saved \$4 million by working with CUPE on new schedules and routes to service the additional area with existing staff and trucks.

Waste diversion: reduce, reuse, recycle

Municipalities can take significant steps to reduce, reuse and recycle solid waste. They can develop and deliver coordinated, cost-effective solid waste programs that keep garbage out of landfills and fuel the green economy.

Municipalities:

- should develop and deliver programs to bring the industrial, commercial and institutional sectors into compliance with emerging standards for waste diversion.
- should continue to be responsible for the blue box program and should be given expanded

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responsibility for reuse and recycling programs for durable goods.

- should be mandated to extend recycling programs and organics pickup programs to all residential units.
- can use their bylaw and licensing powers to cut garbage, for example, by requiring restaurants to use only biodegradable takeout containers as a condition of their business license.

These initiatives must be accompanied by local procurement programs, fair wage policies, and training and employment programs targeted at economically vulnerable local residents.

Keeping it public makes a difference. A 2008 cross-Canada survey of 218 residential recycling programs found that contracting with a private company doesn't deliver cost savings or greater efficiency.⁴

Expanding waste diversion

Extended producer responsibility is an important element of waste diversion. Companies must pay to recycle the excess packaging and other waste they create, helping fund comprehensive public recycling programs.

Recycling and waste disposal delivered by individual producers or producer associations will be less efficient and more expensive. A better solution is for provinces to mandate municipalities to undertake expanded programs. It is more cost-effective for a single, publicly-accountable local government to be responsible for recycling in a geographic area.

Publicly-delivered recycling is an investment that will pay off. There is significant potential to expand public waste diversion programs and keep the resources recovered from the waste streams in the public sector. For example, revenue from the sale of recovered construction materials can help offset program costs. Staying public also creates local green jobs.

Municipalities can make strides in responsible waste management by keeping and expanding public collection and recycling services. Let's build the "zero waste" communities of tomorrow – starting today.

¹ [Ontario Municipal CAO's Benchmarking Initiative](#), 2008. See pp. 77-80

² City of Ottawa, Deputy City Manager, Infrastructure Services and Community Sustainability, report to the Planning and Environment Committee, February 1, 2010 (ACS2010-ICS-ESD-0005).

³ City of Hamilton Public Works Department, Activity Based Costing/Waste Collection Services W04113 – City Wide, September 22, 2004.

⁴ James C. McDavid & Annette E. Mueller. "A cross-Canada analysis of the efficiency of residential recycling services", *Canadian Public Administration*, Volume 51, Issue 4. December 2008.