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Zero waste: Fantasy or the future? [part 4 in waste series]

By [Jeff Nagel - BC Local News](#)Published: **May 21, 2010 9:00 AM**Updated: **May 21, 2010 10:06 AM**

Opponents of a proposed new garbage incinerator for the Lower Mainland are championing an elegant, green alternative: stop generating as much garbage in the first place.

Campaigners in the zero waste movement say Metro Vancouver's draft solid waste management plan doesn't put nearly enough emphasis on waste reduction and recycling.

Get serious about that, they argue, and the region could slash the waste stream and avoid the need to build either a new waste-to-energy plant or sign on to an expanded Cache Creek landfill.

At the same time, we'd turn garbage into needed resources, create green jobs in new recycling industries and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Is it too good to be true?

"I don't think it's a fantasy," says Monica Kosmak, a waste policy consultant who formerly worked for Metro. "It's certainly possible. You set the target and you go for it."

Metro contends its trash reduction plan is both serious and aggressive. It aims to boost the recycling rate from 55 per cent now to a minimum 70 per cent by 2015.

Much of the gains are to be achieved by diverting more wood waste, and collecting food leftovers and other organics to turn into compost or biofuel.

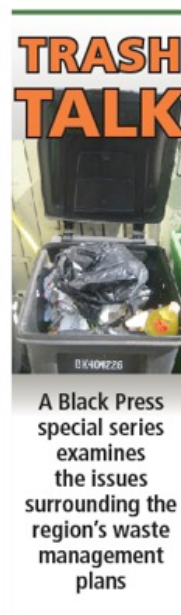
Success will depend on more cities adopting food waste curbside pickup, and residents getting over the "ick" factor of separating their kitchen scraps, storing them and then putting them at the curb.

The plan also hinges on pulling much more paper and cardboard out of the garbage stream. Both are already banned – violators caught dumping such loads at transfer stations can be fined – but a whopping 305,000 tonnes a year still finds its way into the garbage.

Even if such measures succeed in diverting an extra 600,000 tonnes of mainly wood, food and organics per year, Metro projects it will still need more new capacity to dispose of more than a million tonnes of remaining waste in 2015, an amount it expects to continue to climb as the Lower Mainland's population grows by roughly 50 per cent over the next three decades.

That remaining garbage would exceed the combined capacity of the Vancouver Landfill in Burns Bog and the existing Burnaby incinerator, making an extra outlet necessary.

To Kosmak, Metro's math seems calculated to favour a



Pressure is growing to reduce, reuse and recycle our way to a less waste-ridden society and avoid the need for a new incinerator or landfill.

This fourth installment of a Black Press special series on Metro Vancouver's

new incinerator.

"It appears to me the target is to stop at 70 per cent and then build incinerators," she said, adding supplemental targets should be drawn up to go to 80 per cent by 2020 and then 90 per cent by 2030.

She and others say plenty of tools are available to cut waste further.

Pay-as-you-throw pickup, in use in Vancouver and Seattle, makes residents pay for collection based on the size of the can they choose.

Homes can save cash by opting for the tiny micro-can and committing to waste control. But because collection here is done by cities, not Metro, such measures would be up to individual municipalities.

Much tougher enforcement is needed to block the dumping of banned waste, Kosmak added.

That is part of the plan, although Metro officials don't envision anything as intrusive as the can-opening, bag-probing garbage inspectors deployed in jurisdictions like San Francisco.

Options could include info-tagging bags or cans with banned waste, or assessing fines, although Kosmak prefers gentler re-education of residents.

"We're not going to win this if we alienate everyone."

New disposal bans are also likely to block dumping of wood and, eventually, organic waste.

Regulators tread a fine line in punishing wastrels or driving up the price of disposal: going too far can trigger an epidemic of illegal dumping.

Apartments a trouble spot

Metro's current 55 per cent recycling rate is deceptive because it's a blended average – the high recycling rate of the demolition/construction sector (76 per cent) actually pulls up poorer performance of residents.

Single-family homes, often with garages and more space to store recyclables, currently recycle 44 per cent of their garbage.

But in multi-family buildings, where space is tight and garbage sins are anonymized by a common dumpster, the rate plummets to 16 per cent.

That must improve if Metro is to reach its target, particularly since more of us will live in apartments or condos as the region continues to densify.

The region already has one big waste-reduction advantage. B.C.'s product stewardship programs are the envy of most of the recycling world.

The much-lauded takeback programs, most funded by deposits or eco-fees, make industry collect beverage containers, used tires, unwanted paint, pesticides, used oil and, most recently,

special series on Metro Vancouver's garbage strategy explores how far we can go on the road to zero waste.

PREVIOUSLY IN THIS SERIES:

Part 1 – [Burning questions](#)

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MORE RESOURCES

For the public meeting schedule, reports, feedback received so far and the plan itself, see Metro Vancouver's [Draft Integrated Solid Waste and Resource Management Plan page](#)



electronic waste like computers and TVs.

Even so, perfection is elusive.

Encorp captures 77 per cent of beverage containers for recycling, but 230 million a year elude the blue boxes.



Incoming recyclables are sorted from a conveyor belt at a single-stream recycling facility in Surrey.

Tires no longer linger in piles that pose a fire risk, but the industry group that collects them for recycling sends up to 30 per cent to be burned as industrial fuel.

Plastic bottles are ground into pellets for recycling at a plant on Annacis Island, but 20 per cent ends up as residue that becomes garbage.

Those residuals mean that even if everything was collected, a 100 per cent recycling rate doesn't result.

"You will never get around 15 per cent of the waste," said Metro engineer and planning manager Ken Carrusca. "So the ceiling is around 85 per cent."

Other products, made of composite materials or uncompostable organics like leather, defy recycling altogether.

Consider, he said, the optimistic scenario where 90 per cent of people recycle 90 per cent of their waste.

That means at best 81 per cent of materials are going for recycling.

Take into account the unrecyclable residuals that processors leave behind, he said, and it gets difficult to even reach 70 per cent, a level no other major city in the world has surpassed.

"Society is not perfect," Carrusca said.

Increasingly, he added, what remains to be fished out of the waste stream is harder to recycle and more costly.

Making business pay

Takeback programs are the way of the future, argues Helen Spiegelman of Zero Waste Vancouver.

She predicts new takebacks will steadily relieve Metro of disposal responsibility and dump the job on business stewards.

Spiegelman hopes the new programs are punishingly expensive and the high costs spur business to sell products with less packaging and design goods for long life and recyclability rather than disposability.

Consumers would pay more for wasteful goods.

"We have a throwaway society because the producers that profit from making the products they sell to us aren't covering the cost of the waste," she said.



Waste policy analyst Monica Kosmak (left), Metro Vancouver spokesman Ken Carrusca (right).

The provincial government is poised to soon expand the current e-waste takeback to include cellphones, cameras, small appliances, lighting, toys and sports gear. By mid-2012, virtually anything with an electric cord or battery is to be covered, as the program extends to large appliances, electric tools and medical equipment.

Consumers will likely pay more eco-fees on a broader range of new products.

Metro is lobbying for more takebacks and an accelerated pace, especially the introduction of requirements to

collect all packaging – something the environment ministry has pledged to deliver by 2015.

A consumer revolution?

What would something approaching a zero-waste society look like?

Spiegelman sees a world far removed from the "hyper-commercial" lifestyle that so far prevails.

She envisions "discard malls" – reuse centres where people will swap used good instead of buying new – along with new green recycling industries.

"You'll see a lot more spent on stewardship of things we own, rather than just consumption and disposal," she said. "You'll see repair shops. People having their favourite shoes repaired and maintained. It means no longer throwing something away and replacing it."

It amounts to a seismic shift in consumer behaviour.

How will Metro Vancouver reform shoppers and stop the flow of cheap, often overpackaged goods from China?

"It's going to come on us either by choice or by force," predicts Spiegelman, who believes the looming end of cheap oil will soon transform society.

"Our children are not going to be able to do what we did. We are burning and burying their resources."

Spiegelman walks the talk. She buys black beans in bulk and cooks them in a big vat to be frozen – the resulting meals last a month, save money and avoid stacks of cans.

You don't find single-serving convenience meals – Spiegelman calls it "industrial food" – in her cupboard.

She bakes and sews and grows what she can.

"These are practices in the home that people aren't doing because they're so busy making money so they can buy more stuff."

At the end of a week, her garbage bin is empty but for about two cups of mainly film plastic – everything else is recycled or composted.

A self-described eccentric, Spiegelman accepts that not everyone is going to willingly do what she does.

That's where cities and the Metro government come in, she says, by blocking the option of cheap, easy disposal that subsidizes over-consumption.

She said engineers need new instructions – stop making our garbage disappear – a message that runs counter to the idea of turning waste into energy in an incinerator.



Helen Spiegelman composts all food waste scraps in the backyard of her Dunbar neighbourhood home in Vancouver. She produces the weekly equivalent of a couple of cups of mainly plastic garbage. Photo: Boaz Joseph / The Leader

NEXT IN THE SERIES – Vancouver Landfill: Our Trash Mountain

Toronto comes up short

Toronto council first set a target of 100 per cent diversion from landfill back in 2003, but that was deemed unattainable and changed to a 70 per cent goal by 2010.

But Toronto remains far short of the mark.

The city's recycling rate currently is 44 per cent, with single-family homes achieving 60 per cent and multi-family buildings at 20 per cent.

Can the 70 per cent target be reached?

"That is the ultimate question," says solid waste general manager Geoff Rathbone.

He said success will depend on further gains, particularly by expanding a pay-as-you-throw charge system and extending green bin food waste collection to multifamily buildings.

Comparing Toronto to Vancouver is difficult, because Toronto stats don't include much of the commercial, industrial and construction/demolition waste there.

Metro Vancouver's rate includes those sectors, where recycling rates are superior to residential.

Recycling by the numbers...

Metro waste:

- 3.3 million tonnes a year total
- 1.8 million tonnes diverted/recycled
- 1.5 million tonnes to disposal

Metro recycling rates:

- Overall: 55 %
- Demolition/land clearing/construction: 76 %
- Institutional, commercial and light industrial: 44 %
- Single family residential: 46 %
- Multi-family residential: 16 %
- Overall target for 2015: 70 %

Key targets for increased diversion:

- Food and organic waste – makes up 21 % of garbage going to disposal

Wood: 20 per cent

- Paper and cardboard: 19 per cent

Costs:

- Current spending on recycling: \$190 million a year
- Projected by 2015: \$270 million a year

Recycling elsewhere:

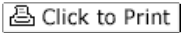
- San Francisco: 69 %
- Toronto: 44 %
- Canada-wide: 22 %
- Austria: 70 %
- Germany: 65 %

- Netherlands: 60 %
- Belgium: 59 %
- Sweden: 48 %

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