

Not In Our Dumps

When it comes to recycling, Nova Scotia is years ahead of Ontario. The small Maritime province has a long-standing policy to divert trash from landfills through programs such as a deposit system for virtually all beverage containers

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Halifax—At the entrance to Dan Chassie's office are jars of road gravel made from old roof shingles, highway guardrails made from used paint pails, and posts made from milk cartons.

"I'm experimenting," he says, stepping around his creations.

In most parts of Canada, it would be odd for a man who owns a landfill – and makes his money by filling it with garbage – to work so hard trying to find new ways to recycle products.

But this is Nova Scotia.

There's a man in Dartmouth who created a business turning boxboard – the stuff used to make cereal and tissue boxes – into form-fitting liners for kitchen composting bins. In Springhill, there's a company that recycles leftover paint into new paint, which you can buy in many parts of Canada, including Toronto.

This is the kind of business innovation that came out of the provincial government's decision to get tough on waste 10 years ago.

Nova Scotia banned organics from landfills, put deposits on virtually every beverage container, from the mini-juice box in a child's lunch box to two-litre pop bottles, required businesses and industry to follow the same recycling rules as residents, and offered cash incentives to municipalities to increase recycling.

"Political will is just a huge thing," says Lorrie Roberts, a manager in Nova Scotia's environment and labour department. "Without it, you go nowhere."

That about sums up Ontario.

Occasionally, the province announces a program, like a partial bottle deposit system that covers just wine and liquor, or a city adds more plastic products to the blue box, but there's no overall strategy leading Ontarians toward more diversion.

The province is in the midst of a waste-disposal crisis, as municipalities and businesses send some 4 million tonnes of garbage, much of it from the GTA, to Michigan each year.

Despite election promises to divert 60 per cent of garbage through the three Rs (reduce, reuse, recycle) and composting by 2008, Ontario diverts just 25 per cent, according to government statistics.

Governments in Ontario have missed so many targets, the environmental commissioner says they've lost all credibility and there's no reason for the public to believe them anymore.

Nova Scotians hit their 50 per cent diversion target in 2000. Since then, they've switched to judging their success with Statistics Canada's disposal rate, which is a slightly different measure.

But by either measure, they recycle more and put less in landfills than other Canadians. They send 427 kilograms per person annually to landfills, little more than half the 810 kg that Ontarians do.

Not satisfied, Nova Scotia passed recently legislation that will push the province to its new goal of 300 kg by 2015.

To get there, the province will have to expand existing diversion programs, find ways to recycle new materials, force more responsibility on the makers of disposal products, and push residents and businesses even harder to make sure they don't get lazy about the three Rs and composting organics.

Nova Scotia's 84 enviro-depots – located around the province, including 23 here in Halifax – provide a strong backbone to build on.

Already, Nova Scotians dutifully take their beverage containers, paint cans, and, in many cases, scrap metal and car batteries to enviro-depots.

Starting in February, electronic waste like TVs, computers and printers, will be banned from landfills, and although the details are still being worked out, enviro-depots seem to be the logical drop-off point.

The legislation that set the 300-kg disposal target also gave the province the power to impose fees on anything disposable, from diapers to batteries to coffee cups, which could be used to generate money to expand diversion programs.

When Nova Scotians buy beverages, they pay a 10-cent deposit (rising to 20 cents on large liquor bottles). When they return them to an depot, they get half the deposit back, 5 or 10 cents per container.

The rest of the deposit money is used by the Resource Recovery Fund Board, a non-profit agency, to develop and implement waste diversion programs, educate the public, and provide grants to businesses developing new recycling techniques and cash to municipalities that increase diversion.

Since 1996, the board has given municipalities more than \$65 million from beverage container deposits. (In Ontario-sized numbers, a similar program would mean \$880 million.)

Through the depots, the board can determine the return rate for all containers and can tailor education campaigns to where they're needed.

A little more than 78 per cent of all the beverage containers sold in Nova Scotia are returned, but the rates vary according to the type. Large liquor bottles top the scale with a 92 per cent return rate while products like juice boxes trail at 66 per cent.

In recent years, 20 of Nova Scotia's 55 municipalities have passed by-laws requiring residents to put their trash at the curb in clear bags to discourage people from throwing away items that can be recycled.

"There's huge opposition to clear bags, but they work," says Bob Kenney, an analyst with the department of environment and labour.

Where clear bags have been introduced, recycling rates have gone up 20 to 40 per cent, Kenney says.

(Not wanting their neighbours to see what they're throwing out, some residents have put bed sheets over their pile of bags at the curb.)

Halifax – which hasn't introduced clear bags – has a different way of trying to make sure people separate recyclables and organics out of their garbage.

"Every bag has to be opened – there are no secrets in Halifax," says Jim Bauld, as he walks around the Otter Lake Waste Processing and Disposal Facility, which serves 40 per cent of Nova Scotia's population.

Every garbage bag that comes into this facility eight kilometres from downtown Halifax is opened. Items like paper and plastic that can be salvaged for recycling are pulled out.

What is recovered this way reduces what goes to landfill, and adds about 9 per cent to the city's recycling numbers, says Bauld, manager of solid waste resources for Halifax Regional Municipality.

"Waste discrepancy loads," ones with unusually high amounts of recyclables like paper, or items hidden in garbage, like car tires, are photographed, and the truck that delivered it can be traced.

If the improper waste came from a particular residential neighbourhood, city officials might then target it for an education campaign about recycling. If it's a business, the city issues a warning, and after three such warnings, the business will be banned from the landfill.

The garbage at the processing facility is shredded and composted over 21 days, before it goes into the landfill. At that point, the garbage looks a bit like brown vacuum fluff. It contains less methane gas, and less leachate, the toxic garbage juice that can often seep into groundwater.

Despite all these steps, half of what eventually goes into the landfill is paper, plastic, glass and organics, all things that can be diverted under existing programs.

Often, by the time the garbage gets to the processing facility, the organic waste has contaminated other recyclable products like plastic.

While Ontario struggles to get to where Nova Scotia is now, the Maritime province is already looking ahead to other challenges – how to tell people they've done a great job, they're the best in Canada, but it's not good enough, they must do more.

Mark Parent, Nova Scotia's environment and labour minister, discovered just how far his province's reputation had travelled when he attended a waste conference in Trinidad last fall.

An official from Puerto Rico, which can easily access all the expertise in the United States, begged Parent to send experts from Nova Scotia to help them tackle their waste issues.

"There were a bunch of displayers (at the conference) from Ontario who got mad. They said: 'You'd think Canada was Nova Scotia.' Didn't bother me too much – we're usually in the shadow of Ontario," Parent says.

So, how did Nova Scotia, population about 900,000, get a decade jump on a province with 13 times the population?

"It could easily have gone the other way," Parent says.

In 1996, Nova Scotia was far from being a leader in the recycling field. It had 20 open-air garbage burning sites and 40 landfills with little to no pollution controls.

But the government of the day was bold, on waste and other issues, Parent says, sounding distinctly non-partisan since he's a Conservative and that government was Liberal.

"There are certain times when a government comes together and says: 'We're going to do the right things no matter what the political cost is.' Not always the wisest thing to do politically because they only won one election, and then they got booted out," Parent says.

But 10 years later, Parent says he's able to build on those early successes and bring in new, equally bold, waste programs, and Nova Scotians are okay with it all because they've been through it before.

"The stars have to align to get over the hump. Once you're over the hump, it leaves successive governments with no choice but to keep going," says Roberts of the environment and labour department.

"Starting is the hardest part."

Nova Scotia bans certain materials from disposal sites:

- Redeemed beverage containers
- Corrugated cardboard
- Newsprint
- Used tires
- Automotive lead-acid batteries
- Leaf and yard waste
- Post-consumer paint products
- Automotive antifreeze
- Steel and tin food containers
- Glass food containers
- #2 HDPE nonhazardous containers, such as ice cream containers and plastic jugs
- Low-density polyethylene bags and packaging
- Compostable organic material, such as food waste, yard waste and soiled and non-recyclable paper

Source: Province of Nova Scotia website