

Plastic questions persist

Region says it needs markets before it can collect items

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By: Erin Hatfield

DURHAM -- The Region doesn't want the blue box to become a fancy garbage bag, and says that's why plastic collection is limited.

Plastic collected in the blue box is restricted to bottles, juice and drink cartons and tubs and lids for things like yogurt, margarine and ice cream. Not collected are toys, make-up jars, fruit and vegetable containers, take-out food containers, moulded bakery and plant trays.

Toronto is phasing various materials, like plastic bags, Styrofoam and plastic wrap, into its blue box program. In response, Durham councillors are hearing from residents who want to know why Durham isn't doing the same.

"We are hearing more and more from our community that we are not doing enough," Pickering Mayor Dave Ryan said at a recent Regional Council meeting. "If the City of Toronto is (recycling Styrofoam and plastic wrap) then we are behind."

Cliff Curtis, commissioner of works, explained his staff actively pursues markets that would enable the Region to collect more plastic products. But without an end market purchaser, those additional products just end up in the garbage.

"We are not confident that we can get rid of (Styrofoam and plastic wrap) in Ontario," Mr. Curtis said in an interview. "So the alternative is to ship it to China and I am not keen on that. We have no control over what they do with it when they get it."

His staff will continue to look at it and is coming to council with a full report in January.

"We are being quite cautious. We want to make sure it actually can be used to make another product," Mr. Curtis said. "We don't want it to end up in landfill because we want it to be true recycling."

This approach is best, according to Joanne St. Godard, the executive director of the Recycling Council of Ontario. She said the goal should be to increase diversion, and adding more materials to the blue box doesn't necessarily do that.

"We are having a problem with some municipalities who are saying to their residents, 'Let's put everything in the blue box and we will take it in and sort it'," Ms. St. Godard said.

But, she explained much of that material simply gets sorted out and thrown into the trash. Until a secure sustainable market is found for a product, Ms. St. Godard said she renders it non-recyclable.

"From my perspective that is giving some misgivings to the public," she said. "If they don't know what truly gets to market they can make some poor purchasing decisions."

She said if the goal is diversion, wise purchasing, reduction and reuse are stronger ways to divert garbage from landfill.

Katherine Ross-Perron, a waste technician at the Region, said it's fine to collect all manner of plastics, but you have to have buyers out there to purchase the material and right now there are not many for Styrofoam and plastic wrap.

"That is one thing the Region has always tried to ensure before we add material. We need reliable and secure end-use market," she said. "Otherwise we just end up landfilling it, which is no good. In Durham the blue box materials that are collected are recycled 100 per cent."