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Region gets tough on trash

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By Reka Szekely

When Regional Council approved a Courtice site as the preferred site for incineration in January, they added a quick amendment, setting a waste diversion target of 70 per cent by 2010.

Compared to a meeting that ran 13 hours, that amendment passed quite quickly.

Now, as the Region plans its waste collection strategy for the next several years, that quick amendment is going to make for some big changes in a short time in some parts of the Region.

While it's easy to imagine Whitby, with a 61-per-cent diversion rate last year, hitting 70 per cent fairly easily, it may be a lot more difficult for others.

The three northern municipalities and Clarington are in the low-to-mid 40 per cent range.

They're receiving weekly garbage collection, with up to three bags per week. That's 12 bags per month. Ajax, Pickering, Whitby and Oshawa get four bags every two weeks or eight bags in the average month.

The plan council is currently considering calls for a three-bag limit every two weeks starting in April 2009. That would drop down to two bags bi-weekly by January 2010 for four bags total per month.

Residents will have to pay if they want to put out additional bags.

That's a great incentive to get people putting recyclables in to the blue box and the kitchen waste into the green bin, both of which will be collected weekly, at no additional charge.

And, a four-bag monthly limit may also encourage some folks to make smarter purchasing decisions, perhaps forgoing products with excessive packaging.

As well, if the plan is approved, and it likely will be, residents will have to switch from the standard green or black garbage bags to clear ones.

Works commissioner Cliff Curtis says that switch increased waste diversion by 30 per cent in Nova Scotia.

There are two reasons clear bags will make us more likely to separate our kitchen organics and recyclables from our waste.

First is the threat of fines. Durham is considering a region-wide waste bylaw that would create penalties for those who break the rules. Clear bags will make enforcement relatively simple. Though not everyone's bag will be checked every time, there's the potential that it might be you this week.

For others, it would be an issue of shame, they don't want their neighbours to know they're too lazy to toss that soup can or flier into the recycling.

It's like the people who only scoop up after their dog when someone else is watching, in this case everyone in the neighbourhood will be.

Of course that raises the issue of privacy. A person's garbage says a lot about them and that's why clear bags are going to be unpopular with many residents.

One opaque grocery-type bag will be allowed per clear bag, containing those personal hygiene items no one wants to display. And those with medical conditions will be able to ask the Region for tags for regular garbage bags. But, beyond that, everything will be visible.

And we'll just have to get used to it, because the closer we get to that 70 per cent, the tougher it's going to be.

Even if all of our municipalities don't get there by 2010, it's going to be difficult for four of them, and it's essential that we have a plan in place that gets everyone there as soon as possible.

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