

COMMENT: THE NEW GOSPEL

Zero waste. Dream on, stupid Birkenstocker. Or maybe, just maybe...

JOHN BARBER

jbarber@globeandmail.com

June 14, 2008

Say "zero waste" to a know-it-all and he will laugh in your face. Who really believes a modern consumer society can function without either burning or burying vast amounts of garbage? Dream on, stupid Birkenstocker.

But say "zero waste" to a savvy municipal manager, an incinerator salesman or a soft-drink executive and you'll have their full attention, pronto. Some will welcome it, others will dread it, but all of them will be busy positioning themselves for the expected groundswell. The people who know what's happening all know that zero waste is real - and closer than almost anyone else might imagine.

The new movement has found rich ground in Ontario, where blue boxes overflow with crap nobody ever wanted and the province is finally beginning to force corporations to assume greater responsibility for throwaway products. This week saw the launch of the Ontario Zero Waste Coalition at a Niagara Falls conference attended by waste professionals eager to learn about the new creed.

Attendee Guy Crittenden, respected editor of *Solid Waste* magazine, expected the bureaucrats, managers and consultants to react coolly to the new gospel of zero waste, as preached by true believers from British Columbia and the United States. "In fact, it was the opposite," he reported. "People got quite excited about it."

It wasn't religion, but rather economics, that inspired the professionals gathered at Niagara Falls, according to Mr. Crittenden. For decades, municipal managers have chafed under the requirements of the province's "shared responsibility" model of waste diversion, in which industry pays about half the cost of recycling its throwaway products and excess packaging. Zero waste assesses industry for the full cost of dealing with its own trash.

"Why on earth should municipalities pay for industry's crap?" Mr. Crittenden asked, summing up the prevailing mood. "They're fed up with receiving 40 cents on the dollar, and they're pushing for 100 per cent funding of the blue box."

But rationalizing an out-of-control recycling system is only part of the new program. Even more important is preventing the production of waste in the first place by insisting that industry take responsibility for managing their products from cradle to grave. The right combination of such initiatives could easily drive waste diversion rates (the amount of garbage that doesn't end up at the dump) above 90 per cent, according to the coalition.

Municipalities are receptive because they can see it happen. Diversion rates of 60 per cent are now common. Every time a municipality drives higher, it succeeds. Toronto's new blue bins made a

measurable difference the moment they appeared. Markham is already above 70 per cent. The race to zero waste has become the hottest municipal sweepstakes since the move to indoor plumbing.

The best proof of that is the speed with which those who stand to lose from zero waste are moving to co-opt it. Google the phrase in Canada and you are likely to land at a site run by Plasco Energy Group of Ottawa, which is marketing high-tech incinerators. The North American rights to the European "Green Dot" program, a zero-waste model that identifies the most environmentally responsible products and packaging, are held by a Canadian industry group that lobbies for "shared responsibility" - the opposite of zero waste.

Producers fear zero waste as the end of a free ride. So does the incinerator industry, which will lose its economic foundation if the idealists are even half right. That's happening now: The business case supporting construction of an incinerator in Durham Region assumes that waste diversion there will only reach 60 per cent in 30 years time. But Durham has already reached 60 per cent and it's just getting going.

What's truly radical about zero waste is that it simply ignores the never-ending ruckus over the safest technology to deal with the alleged "garbage crisis." By focusing on policy and economics instead - banning throwaways and making producers pay for their own waste - zero waste makes landfills and incinerators essentially unnecessary.

As a pipe dream, this one is hot as can be.

jbarber@globeandmail.com