

Looking at waste in a new way

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Maybe one day, Niagara will be known as the place where the end of garbage began.

No more trash, landfills or incinerators.

That may seem an unlikely dream, especially in Niagara. In the peninsula, we recycle and compost less than half our waste, with the rest trucked to the dump.

But Liz Benneian thinks it is doable, here and across the province.

The longtime environmentalist chose a Niagara Falls conference in June to announce a new trash-busting advocacy group: the Ontario Zero Waste Coalition.

The concept of "zero waste" isn't simply to get rid of garbage, said Benneian, spokeswoman for the new advocacy group.

"It's about looking at waste in an entirely new way," Benneian said.

That includes changing the way we turn our resources into products and forcing ourselves to look at garbage as a resource.

It's a big job, but it needs doing, said Catherine Habermebl, Niagara Region's acting waste manager.

"We should be looking to the day when it is deemed socially unacceptable to place garbage at your curb," she said.

"The public, all levels of government, and manufacturers have a role to play to transform our throw-away society into a zero-waste society."

To start, one of the new coalition's goals is to convince manufacturers to take "cradle to grave" responsibility for their products.

That would mean forcing companies to pay 100 per cent of the cost for blue box recycling, for example.

Industry already pays about half the cost of municipal recycling programs in the province through the government-mandated agency Waste Diversion Ontario.

But that means municipalities (read: you, the taxpayer) pay the other half, several million dollars every year.

"Municipalities are literally being dumped on," said Benneian, who also heads the Oakvillegreen Conservation Association.

"Taxpayers are being made responsible for taking care of waste generated by companies."

Benneian calls that logic "bizarre."

The Association of Municipalities of Ontario apparently agrees.

It has issued a discussion paper suggesting phasing in full "extended producer responsibility," essentially eliminating all blue box costs for municipalities.

Some companies are already taking responsibility, Benneian said.

Future Shop recently began collecting used, small electronics. Carpet giant Interface accepts old carpet tiles.

New government-ordered programs are coming online, too.

Waste Diversion Ontario rolled out an electronics recycling program earlier this year. A new, industry-funded hazardous waste recycling program was introduced last week.

Benneian believes Ontario and Canada can go further. For example, introducing laws:

- Banning toxic chemicals like mercury from manufactured goods like electronics.
- Designed to reduce packaging.
- Enforcing recycling of construction, industrial and commercial waste.

Consumers need to come to terms with the fact this won't be cheap.

"We can't expect it will be cheap and easy," Benneian said. "It doesn't cost much to dig a hole in the ground and fill it, but that isn't a real option anymore."

Benneian, who recently moved to Niagara, is busy gathering non-governmental groups from across the province to join the coalition.

If you want to learn more about the Ontario Zero Waste Coalition, e-mail lizcdn@yahoo.com.

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