

SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE: 45. THE BEST WAY TO 'ZERO WASTE'¹

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We need to rethink our recycling policies and adopt a better approach. It is far too easy to become critical, cynical or even amused by the words and actions of Metro Vancouver officials as they grapple with the need to reform solid waste management practices in the Lower Mainland. The fact remains that theirs is a daunting and important challenge. However, clarity around what the real issues are, let alone the solutions, continues to elude the decision-makers.

One of the key points that most Metro politicians and bureaucrats appear to agree on is that, aside from striving for less garbage in the first place, recycling is preferable to incineration or landfills. The goal is zero waste. Fair enough. But do they fully understand what this means? Recycling involves both challenges and opportunities that have never been completely reconciled in North America and particularly Canada. A little history might assist.

What's Wrong With Today's Recycling

The recycling movement, as a mainstream *cri de coeur*, began to gain steam about 30 years ago. It involved a veritable mish-mash of public, commercial and non-profit efforts which were highly uncoordinated. One result was that solid waste that was not permanently disposed of became a saleable commodity rather than a public good. Therefore the cost of the raw material for the nascent remanufacturing industry became a serious disincentive to the development of technologies that would lead to reliable, durable new products that did not utilize virgin resources. Products that are produced from recycled materials often end up costing more than those made from primary materials where the processes involved are less challenging at least from the standpoint of traditional accounting. Plenty of small scale niche operations exist but their impact on reducing un-utilized waste is close to negligible.

In the end, there is an underdeveloped remanufacturing industry in North America in terms of anything close to large scale production that utilizes significant amounts of solid waste. So where do the diverted materials end up? It is no exaggeration to say that recycling is as much about "out-of-sight-out-of-mind" as land-filling or incineration, but with more fanfare and middle people each taking a cut along the way with no significant economic or environmental gains close to home.

In western Canada and the United States, materials are collected, sorted and "first stage" processed, which generally means some sort of basic modification and bundling. They are then, very often, shipped overseas where they may or may not be converted to products that are sold back to us. There has long been speculation that if the brokers involved cannot make a market for the materials then they simply dispose of them in ways that are anything but environmentally sound. The carbon footprint involved in shipping our discarded stuff thousands of miles away is huge. And countries that do remanufacture often make up for the inherent economic challenges of doing so by utilizing sweatshop arrangements that injure and even kill the workers.

¹ The Tyee, September 03, 2010

A Better Way To Go

The alternative is perhaps obvious. We must rethink and reboot the basic economics of recycling and remanufacturing such that we can utilize materials to create value-added products in our own communities. To start with, make solid waste of all kinds available to clean-tech remanufacturing operations at a price as close to zero as possible. This one step alone would go a long way towards making Metro Vancouver an attractive location for a range of manufacturers and product developers. The City of Vancouver is the most likely lead candidate for this, given that it controls both its transfer station and its landfill site and has unused industrial land close to major sources of valuable solid waste.

Beyond that, the various levels of government must develop regulations and land use policies that encourage diversion of materials to local manufacturing and discourage shipping the materials elsewhere or, worse still, dumping anything more than the completely unusable in landfills or incinerators. The benefits of this would be significant in terms of green jobs, research and development, technology transfer, an increased tax base, economic diversification and sound environmental stewardship. These are the priorities that all governments say they care about.

But will it happen? One wonders. Oxen will be gored unless they are quick to adapt which many surely will resist. And governments tend not to mess with well-entrenched entities that pay their taxes and make all the right moves and donations. In Metro Vancouver what I fear is that established waste haulers, landfill operators and incinerators will meet the zero waste and diversion challenges by simply jumping on the current recycling bandwagon to a much greater extent than they have to this point. Materials handling facilities will become larger and more numerous. In short, feed stock for what could conceivably be an entirely new industrial base for the area will simply be sent away.

Downside to Making Manufacturers Responsible

The provincial government's new push to make original manufacturers and retailers responsible for taking back waste created by their product sales will, ironically, encourage this regressive trend. The path of least resistance for the solid waste management industry and assorted subcontractors will be to position themselves much more so than they have already as the parties who collect and then ship materials back to manufacturers regardless of whether they are down the road or, more likely, on the other side of the continent or world. They will receive a hefty fee, of course, for this service, while burning literally tonnes of fuel along the way with the well-known effects. And all this will be rationalized as being better than the current situation when nothing could be further from the truth.

It must also be recognized that municipalities themselves are part of the industry and therefore a factor in the overall conundrum. Many British Columbia communities receive healthy landfill fees and themselves sell diverted materials in the so-called recycling market. Can Metro Vancouver municipalities see their way clear to give up this easy money for something more speculative and challenging but, in the long run, much more productive economically, socially and environmentally?

Chance to Create New Industries

This is a classic example in which free market ventures must be molded and directed by intelligent public policy and rigorous regulation. Metro Vancouver, in coordination with the provincial government, has the opportunity to create an entirely new industrial base for itself but this will not happen unless it focuses the efforts of the private sector and itself through a combination of crisp incentives and disincentives.

The waste management industry will adapt, and make money from this new industrial base, if it is pointed in the optimal direction. Bleeding edge will become leading edge. Otherwise it is only rational for the industry to continue to take the path of least resistance and push on with its current profitable ventures while simply adding more "faux diversion" to its list of activities in an effort to placate public officials who may not be paying close enough attention.

In a more general sense, what is required is that traditional notions of accounting and cost-benefit analysis be modified to accommodate evolving environmental and social realities. It is vogue to speak of notions such as the "triple bottom line" but rarely do these principles get adhered to in any sort of practical manner. Metro Vancouver has the opportunity to do just that in the context of its solid waste management policies. At the same time, it has an equally important opportunity to turn back the clock a generation or more and get right what was done so very wrong in North America with regard to recycling.

The weeks and months ahead will determine whether or not our leaders will seize the moment or squander it through short term thinking and lack of vision. I wish them well.