

## Recycling soft plastics not so straightforward

North Shore News

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

Dear Editor:

While over in North Vancouver visiting, I was shocked to learn that the North Shore does not recycle soft plastics.

Are you kidding? When other municipalities are serious in their actions to reduce the garbage that is killing our planet, North Vancouver residents merrily toss their soft plastics into the landfills. Shame on you. It sounds like a bunch of hypocritical lip-servers are running city hall.

Sign me: Disgusted from Duncan.

S. Pedersen

Duncan

Al Lynch, manager of the North Shore Recycling Program, responds:

Our current contract with Waste Management of Canada (curbside) and SuperSave Disposal (depot) are multi-year contracts that cannot be changed mid-stream. So we cannot add items to the program year-to-year as issues with specific materials, like plastic bags, come up.

It's important to remember that film plastic (plastic bags, food wrap, etc.) make up less than one per cent of Metro Vancouver's solid waste stream by weight. As a region, we've decided to focus our resources, both fiscal and human, on getting the big offenders out of the waste stream first: that is organic waste and construction waste, which together make up a dramatic portion of our waste stream. We have limited financial resources; we must use them wisely.

Our local plastics recycler, Merlin Plastics in Delta, has told us that they only recycle film plastic (bags, sheeting) for a select few, committed local retail stores that can guarantee clean, uncontaminated plastics. Recycling plastics from unsupervised curbside programs is a very costly process due to contamination issues.

On the North Shore we make it a policy to only collect materials we can ship to local processors and ideally recycle within North America. The reason for this is almost strictly environmental. It is our well-researched and professional opinion that shipping plastics overseas for recycling is of dubious value environmentally, and is potentially harmful from a climate change and hazardous-waste perspective (i.e., shipping emissions and lax environmental laws in some developing countries where these plastics are often sent for recycling).

At the North Shore Recycling Program, we take very seriously the responsibility of fiscal stewardship. Accepting plastic bags and other low-value, high-cost materials in the program would

run counter to this, as plastics of all kinds are currently a cost to us (read you), as compared to paper products and packaging, which is a revenue generator. The more types of plastics we collect, the more it costs. And if it's simply being shipped overseas, the costs -- and the stakes -- are even higher.

As you may have read in the Vancouver Sun, it costs the City of San Francisco \$6,000 to collect one tonne of used plastic bags from residential sources -- and they receive \$27 for the material. In our opinion, that is hardly fiscally or environmentally responsible.

We believe in industry-operated, extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs, where the manufacturers and users of a particular product are responsible for the costs of disposing of or recycling it properly (and locally, if possible). If we had industry-operated EPR programs for plastic bags, batteries, food packaging and other disposable items, it would make it economically efficient and create incentives for product redesign to strengthen recycling markets.

In the meantime, British Columbia, and in particular, Metro Vancouver, is already further ahead than the rest of Canada as many retail stores (e.g. Save-on, Safeway, London Drugs, Supersave, etc.) already take back plastic bags and other consumer packaging products (check at [rbc.bc.ca](http://rbc.bc.ca) or [northshorerecycling.ca](http://northshorerecycling.ca), click on Recycle This for specifics), though we have been unable to find out exactly what they are doing with these materials.

Ultimately, each of us is responsible for reducing our own waste in every way possible -- including refusing to buy "stuff" that isn't easily recyclable.

Just because an item is technically recyclable doesn't mean it's most efficient, or responsible, to do so. From a big-picture environmental perspective, it may make more sense, and take less energy, to truck this waste to the Burnaby waste-to-energy facility and at least get something back from it, rather than expending more energy shipping it across the globe (or even across the country) for questionable benefit.

It's critical that we keep the "big picture" in mind during these discussions. Many municipalities collect "all plastics" in their curbside and depot programs. But what they often can't tell you is exactly what is happening to those materials, how much it costs to collect them, and how many of them end up as garbage in the end due to contamination.

I don't wish to imply anyone is trying to purposely bamboozle residents -- it's all done with the best of intentions -- but in our research, we've been unable to find any statistics that say those materials are being efficiently recycled in local markets. If you can find out otherwise, we'd very much love to hear it.

Generally speaking, those municipalities collect plastic bags because residents have demanded it, or they've been unsuccessful in keeping those plastics out of the recycling stream in the first place -- not because it's the most environmentally or fiscally prudent thing to do. We'll be researching these topics again in the next few months as we prepare for our next curbside recycling contract. It could be that markets have changed in the last few months -- but so far, we haven't seen any evidence of it.