

Organic waste recycling pays off

BY DAVID MCGRANE, SASKATOON STAR-PHOENIX, APRIL 25, 2014

McGrane is a political studies professor at St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan. He is also a member of the city's Environmental Advisory Committee.

My wife grew up with citywide curbside recycling for papers and plastics in Quebec while I, as a Saskatchewan boy, had never heard of such a thing.

When I convinced her to move to Saskatoon seven years ago, she was appalled to realize that her new hometown did not have a municipal curbside recycling program for paper and plastics. She was unable to live the environmentally sustainable lifestyle that was readily available in nearly all other urban centres of Canada.

Over the past three years, Saskatoon has caught up to the rest of the country in recycling paper and plastics. However, we should not rest on our laurels. The next logical step to improve waste management in Saskatoon is a municipal curbside collection program for organic waste such as leaves, branches, grass clippings and kitchen scraps. This waste would be composted to make fertilizer.

A recent StarPhoenix article reported that the city administration is examining options for organic waste collection, with a report coming before council in the near future.

Several Canadian cities recently have created curbside organic waste collection programs that are administered by the municipality. These cities range from large metropolitan areas such as Hamilton, Toronto, and Ottawa to smaller cities such as Nanaimo and Guelph.

There are massive environmental benefits to curbside organic waste collection. The typical waste of a household consists of: 40 per cent organic; 40 per cent recyclable paper, plastics, glass, and metal; 10 per cent bulky goods; and 10 per cent other material. The combination of our paper and plastics recycling program with an

organic waste collection program would mean that 80 per cent of wastes from an average Saskatoon household would be diverted from the landfill than when my wife and I moved here seven years ago.

Landfilling organic waste produces two environmental problems for Saskatoon. First, when organics are exposed to water in landfills, the liquid trickles down through the pile, picking up contaminants along the way. As recent concerns over landfill leachate seeping into the river illustrate, reducing our landfilled organic waste lowers the risk of groundwater contamination.

Second, Saskatoon's landfill is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Organic waste buried in landfills decays without oxygen, thereby producing methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Saskatoon should be doing its part to help Canada meet its goals in reducing GHGs. The right combination of organics (food waste and yard waste) along with frequent turning and aeration will reduce Saskatoon's methane production. Environmental benefits are not the only reason to adopt an organic waste collection program. There are compelling economic reasons.

Building a new landfill is extremely expensive and controversial, and also bad for the environment. Our landfill has about 40 years of capacity left at current waste diversion rates, but Saskatoon's population is growing rapidly. An organic waste collection program would mean that we could continue to use our existing landfill long into the future. In fact, our goal should be to attain an appropriate rate of waste reduction and diversion so that we never have to build another landfill.

The Canadian Federation of Municipalities estimates that composting creates seven jobs compared to just one created through landfilling. Further, municipal revenue can be created by selling the compost, with an organic waste collection program helping to pay for itself.

Finally, a recent report by the Institute of Certified Management Consultants argued that Saskatchewan's future economic growth depends on the ability of its major cities to attract skilled and educated workers through improving the "sustainability and appeal of

their urban environment." Being in the first wave of Canadian cities to adopt organic waste collection will build Saskatoon's brand as a city on the leading edge of environmentally sustainable urban living.

In short, a municipal curbside organic waste program would be good for the environment, good for the economy, and good for Saskatoon.

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