

## **Municipal Recycling Operations: Trials and Tribulations**

### **Some history of recycling in Swift Current**

We started collecting paper and cardboard in 1994 for recycling. That year we sent 49 ½ tonne to Urban Forest Recyclers and we received \$40.00/tonne for it. I assume that the program was started late in the year because in 1995 we saw an increase of 327%. At that time we had set up three unmanned depots in the City. Paper and cardboard collection continued to increase each year until 2003 which showed a 10% drop from 2002. I don't remember what would have caused that drop but after that we continued to increase until 2005 when we had to shut down our unmanned collection depots because of excessive contamination. We have been somewhat spoiled here in Swift Current because we have Urban Forest Recyclers situated right here. We have always been able to deliver our paper unsorted and unbaled directly to their plant. When the contamination occurred, UFR told us they could no longer accept our paper from the unsupervised depots. We had to go to plan B (first we had to make a plan B) where we consolidated all of our collection into a supervised, limited-access collection depot. Of course the shut-down happened mid-year after budgets are approved so there was a huge delay while we reorganized and budgeted for a collection program that UFR could accept.

FIRST Lesson - plan A should include plans B thru G; the public are like dairy cows, they get set in a routine and they are not very happy when you upset or cancel that routine.

Once we had our supervised depot up and running, our paper collection numbers came back right away in spite of the limited access and even continued to increase to a high of 416 tonne in 2009 for which we received \$40.00/tonne.

In 2010 we were told that UFR could no longer accept cardboard and boxboard. As a result we had to come up with a plan C for cardboard. This has led to a drop of almost 100 tonnes in collection, as we have to turn away a lot of commercial cardboard.

Parallel to the paper and cardboard collection, we started tin and glass collection. Diamond Steel, a local scrap dealer, has provided the bins for tin cans and has providing excellent service for Swift Current despite receiving garbage and other contaminants as well as putting up with poor markets for the tin cans. Glass is currently being stockpiled.

We started collecting plastic in 2002. We set up bins for plastic at our unmanned depots and we contracted with the Saskatchewan Abilities Council to bale the plastic. The operation was taken over by the Salvation Army in 2005 which ran fine for a few months until some labour issues shut the whole thing down for about 5 months.

2<sup>nd</sup> big lesson: you can't just simply shut recycling programs off; if you leave anything that resembles a bin in a place where people were used to dropping things off they will continue to drop stuff off until you send armed guards out and wing a few of them. This is when the public goes from dairy cow to seagull mode - lots of squawking etc.

We resumed plastic recycling and haven't had any hiccups for some time although the market hasn't been very dependable. While we have been able to send it out we haven't always been paid for it unless you count the warm fuzzy feeling we all have for doing the right thing.

In 2001 we started a yard waste collection and compost program. This program was modeled after a similar program we looked at in another Saskatchewan city. We made arrangements with a local gravel company that had the resources and the market to process and sell finished compost. All we had to do was get it to them and debug it. The program worked well for about 2 years until I had used up all the debuggers in the Southwest. We tried to convert the public to biodegradable bags but the public uptake on that change was minimal. The contractor couldn't deal with the mess and opted out. And the public kept delivering yard waste and demanding that we continue collecting it no matter that we no longer had a processing facility.

Big lesson: even though the municipality might have created or played a major role in creating a recycling program the public will consider that program to be a fundamental human right and the municipality cannot remove it or stop it or even change it without divine intervention.

In summary: recycling programs cost a lot of money to operate properly and cost a lot more to operate improperly; trying to design programs on the fly doesn't work and copying other peoples' programs is not always a solution. You cannot create vast projects with half vast plans. Bite the bullet: spend money to properly design and create integrated programs. Always try to define weaknesses and plan for contingencies.

Dan Knutson, City of Swift Current

[d.knutson@swiftcurrent.ca](mailto:d.knutson@swiftcurrent.ca)