

Condo owners scramble to meet July 1 deadline for recycling kitchen scraps

Haulers are subject to penalties at waste facilities

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 29, 2015



Serge D'Allaire, property manager and condo owner at the Newport on Main.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

A single, 250-litre garbage bin sits inside a basement room at the Classico condominium at 1328 West Pender, waiting to be pressed into service to meet the latest government dictum on recycling — this time, kitchen scraps.

Roman Piechocki, strata council president for the 201-unit Coal Harbour building, concedes it is a modest initial response to a Metro Vancouver ban on organics from condos and businesses at regional waste-disposal facilities that went into effect on Jan. 1. That includes the City of Vancouver's south transfer station and landfill in Delta at Burns Bog.

"We've just got one (bin). If it goes well, we'll get more once people get educated," he says. "We're getting there slowly."

While condo owners are generally supportive of the new recycling rules, Piechocki says finding space for more garbage containers could be a problem for many condo buildings, adding he is also concerned about the smell in summer.

He also asserts that Metro's program is being rolled out poorly. "In general, there is a lack of concise information on this issue," Piechocki laments. "It's a bit confusing."

While some condo councils fear a litany of fines effective July 1, when the six-month grace period expires, the reality should be quite different.

For starters, Metro Vancouver will issue the fines against the garbage collectors — not the condos — for an amount equal to 50 per cent of the tipping fee where the volume of organics exceeds 25 per cent of the load.

This mirrors a practice already in place for other banned items such as corrugated cardboard,

recyclable paper, green waste, glass and metal containers, plastics, and beverage containers. Zero-tolerance items such as batteries, electronics, gypsum drywall, paint and tires result in a minimum \$50 fine.

And the fines can add up. In 2013, both private and municipal haulers were fined more than \$450,000 for delivering banned items to regional waste sites.

Contracted regional inspectors conduct visual inspections of the waste dumped by haulers and make a judgment call without tearing open individual garbage bags, a process that will continue after July 1 with kitchen scraps.

Paul Henderson, Metro Vancouver's general manager of solid waste services, noted there are about 750,000 loads per year received at regional waste facilities, of which about 20 per cent are inspected. "It wouldn't be practical to do anything but a visual inspection," he said.

Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie, chairman of Metro Vancouver's zero-waste committee, said there are good reasons to keep organics out of landfills, not just because they take up valuable space but because they generate methane gas, a contributor to global warming.

"I realize enforcement can be a challenge," he said. "Once the businesses and multi-family dwellings adjust, I think people will want to exclude their organics from the regular garbage and the matter will be fairly smooth. I believe people want to comply with the rules."

The hauling industry is not quite as enthusiastic.

Ralph McRae, chairman of Northwest Waste, calls the fines a "simple money grab" that does little to deter behaviour of the customers.

"When that truck tips at the transfer station, there is waste from 50 to 75 customers on board," he says. "How could we possibly trace that back? It's usually a different offender each time. Sometimes it's not even the fault of the customer. Someone has illegally dumped the banned substance in their bin and run away. Our driver can't see what's in the bin when it's dumped, so that's not an effective way to police it, either."

According to a Metro Vancouver bulletin, "Typically, only loads from large generators such as grocery stores and food processors" will exceed the 25-per-cent threshold in the first year. That should change significantly as the threshold is reduced to 10 per cent and then five per cent over the next three years.

Like the flow of garbage, Metro Vancouver's plans for dealing with condos remaining a moving target.

Henderson said the region is looking at offering haulers an incentive to the current penalty-based program.

Under a potential new scenario, haulers who work with their condo customers — the ones who generate the garbage — to become certified might get a break on fines if they are found to be exceeding thresholds on banned items, or receive access to a priority lane at dumping facilities.

Noting that Santa Clara, Calif., south of San Francisco, already has such a model, Henderson said a pilot program could be in place in Metro Vancouver later this year. "We think it has merit," he said. "Our program is focused on the disposal facilities. We don't have any authority over the generators."

It is a novel approach to strengthening the weak link in the regional recycling system.

The latest statistics from Metro Vancouver show the estimated diversion rate (the process of diverting waste from landfills) for single-family dwellings was 60 per cent in 2013, up from 56 per cent in 2012, due to food-scrap recycling and a trend toward municipalities switching to every-other-week collection of garbage.

The industrial-commercial-institutional sector diversion rate was estimated at 39 per cent, and multi-family residences at 28 per cent.

Because individual municipalities are rolling out their own programs designed to meet the Metro Vancouver ban on organics, condo owners should contact their city halls directly for the most accurate information, Henderson recommends.

In New Westminster, each apartment or condo has been provided with a kitchen container to collect food scraps. Centralized bins in each building are collected weekly by the city's contractor, Waste Management, and taken to a registered compost facility.

Surrey has a similar system, and is providing paper bags for lining kitchen containers — packages of 10 are \$1 at participating recreation facilities. The city suggests freezing meat scraps until collection day. Baking soda can be used to decrease odours.

Burnaby says it has been requiring multi-family complexes to separate and recycle food scraps since 2013.

Vancouver provides free kitchen containers to individuals as part of its Green Bin program. For those condos that prefer to hire a private company for kitchen scraps, the city provides a website for questions they should be asking (at vancouver.ca/home-property-development/food-scraps-haulers.aspx). "We have made our contract pricing for kitchen containers available to the private food-scrap haulers servicing Vancouver, so that they can provide them to their customers," said city spokesperson Jag Sandhu.

Metro Vancouver generally recommends that condo owners who feel the need to line the scraps containers in their kitchens use paper rather than plastic, or even biodegradable bags, which may cause problems and confusion when they are delivered to any number of private organic recyclers.

"There's all kinds of potential concerns," Henderson said. "At the facilities, they don't know the kind of bag you've used."

The new initiative is also putting garburators out of business, since that is waste that should now be put in the organics bins. Condos already frowned on them for clogging plumbing, and they also use water unnecessarily.

Back at Classico, strata councillor Irfaan Hafeez argues that condos face many challenges that single-family homes do not, including trying to achieve the same recycling culture for more than 400 residents.

With 60 per cent rentals, these residents "mostly treat their condo lifestyle like a hotel — opposite of the green attitude, as most waste gas heat, electricity, water and over consume," he said. A relatively high turnover rate also makes education difficult, and rental agencies may be out of touch with new regulations.

Language barriers and cultural differences must also be factored in. And there is the difficulty in enforcing strata rules that do not achieve 75-per-cent support. Having said that, the condo does maintain a video camera in the recycling/trash room and has issued \$200 fines to violators — although the camera cannot look through a black garbage bag for bones or orange peels. "Compliance will be a mountain to climb for a strata," Hafeez said.

Tony Gioventu, executive director of the Condominium Home Owners Association of B.C., said meeting the July 1 deadline is all about education: "It's not a big problem for the strata to just get their hauler to add an organic waste disposal unit. The challenge is getting the residents of the building to manage their organic waste separately. That will be a lot of work for strata corporations. They're volunteers and they're going to have to educate their owners."

Metro Vancouver estimates 40 per cent of an average household garbage is food scraps, which means

compliance is critical if the region is to achieve its goal of 70-per-cent diversion in 2015, up from 60 per cent in 2013. The longer-term goal is 80 per cent by 2020.

In 2013, organics recycling included: yard trimmings, 66,564 tonnes; yard and foods scraps, 204,477 tonnes; and backyard compost, 38,068 tonnes.

The region estimates it needs 250,000 more tonnes of organics recycled to reach 80 per cent.

At Newport on Main, a 153-unit condo (11 of them commercial) at 3480 Main, the city removes the normal recyclables, Waste Management the trash, and Growing City the organics. Residents are ahead of the game, having started recycling organics and kitchen scraps last October. Since then, the number of organics bins has increased to six from two, and more than 6.5 tonnes of organics have been removed from the waste stream.

The cost of servicing the garbage compactor dropped to \$1,467 in November 2014 — the first full month of organic recycling — from \$1,807 in November 2013. The goal is to have the garbage compactor picked up once every two weeks instead of the current weekly removal.

On occasion over the years, when Waste Management has been fined by Metro Vancouver, the company has been able to trace violations back to Newport on Main by identifying the compactor, something more difficult with black bags tossed in a large generic bin.

"When they remove the compactor, they take the whole unit," explains Serge D'Allaire, property manager and condo owner. "If they find banned items, they can prove where they came from. We've been fined a few times, like \$50. It comes out of the kitty."

"You still have people who don't care, don't give a hoot. These are the people we need to get to. Eventually, they'll get the message."

Individual condo owners purchased two types of kitchen containers from Growing City (as seen on CBC-TV's *Dragons' Den*) — \$15 for plastic and \$40 for stainless steel versions, he said.

Newport condo owner Charmaine Lepp, a medical sales representative, believes that positive, not negative, reinforcement is the answer. "If owners know how much money they're saving, how it affects their bottom line, they'll be more inclined to get on board."

"This is a condo that has generally been proactive on many levels. It's pretty easy to get buy-in. Vancouver's a green city and we're trying to model that."

The condo had its own town hall meeting, where residents aired concerns about the potential for organics to be smelly, attract pests and ask "Where are you going to put it, because I don't want it beside my car," D'Allaire said. "For most strata, that's the major problem — where are they going to put it?"

The condo also alerted residents through emails and flyers. "You don't want to spring it on them. People here know what's coming up."

Lesley Casson, a graphic designer and condo owner, expresses the condo's general sentiment that the City of Vancouver should have conducted a better education campaign for condos, especially important for the larger ones. But she remains committed to the concept.

"We have to look at the bigger picture, all the things we're doing to the Earth. At least we can do something that's good."

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