

February 8, 2010

City of Winnipeg Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works Committee:

Saturday's Free Press reported that Winnipeg's public service is recommending (a) the approval of a seven-and-a-half year contract for weekly recycling pickup in the northwest section of the city and (b) a pickup of yard waste only at seasonal peaks as the least-cost acceptable option for collecting a portion of the organic waste stream. The seven-month and twelve-month organic pickup options were judged to be too expensive.

Unfortunately the analysis of options is incomplete because they all assume an unchanging baseline of weekly garbage residual pickup. Yet once recyclables and organic matter are separated from other garbage, the residuals are likely less than a third of the waste stream. There is no need to pick up all three discard streams weekly.

Currently Winnipeg residential waste and recycling requires two passes every week (the garbage truck and the recycling truck) or four passes every two weeks. Toronto, on the other hand, is able to add organics pickup to the recyclables and garbage pickups without adding to the number of passes. Organics are picked up every week in Toronto, while garbage and recyclables alternate from week to week, so there are still just two trucks a week. Suburban Halifax does even better. Their trucks make only three passes every two weeks. Garbage and organics are picked up in alternate weeks and recycling pickup coincides with one of these every other week. Please see: http://www.toronto.ca/garbage/single/correct_setout.htm, <http://www.halifax.ca/wrms/documents/2010Areall.pdf>, and <http://www.halifax.ca/wrms/documents/ZoneABNov09.pdf>.)

Probably the most economical of all would be a system used for years in Oakland California, where trucks with two compartments pick up garbage every week but recyclables and organics on alternate weeks. This would only be a cost saving if a MMRF and a composting facility were located at the landfill sites. Depending on the way organics are defined and the willingness of the public to separate materials, the ratio could be changed to organics every week with residuals and recycling on alternate weeks. Or, if experience warranted it, recyclables could be picked up each week with organics and residuals alternating. The once a week pass with all materials taken to landfill sites with recycling MMRFs and composting facilities would likely have the lowest operational cost both fiscally and environmentally.

The examples of the collection systems in Toronto, Halifax and Oakland demonstrate that we need not simply add a third pass for organics to Winnipeg's weekly two passes for garbage and recyclables and calculate an incremental cost for that. We need to think more systematically and flexibly about how the three waste streams interact and look to other jurisdictions for examples of best practices.

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Before the Infrastructure Renewal and Public Works Committee makes any decisions on recycling and organics contracts, they should ask for additional information about costs. For example, what would be the cost of the recycling contract if pickups occurred every other week, giving customers the option of the larger container? Presumably the contractor would need only half as many trucks and save fuel and labour if only half the streets were covered each week. Likewise, what would be the estimated cost of a garbage collection contract if the pickups occurred every other week? And then ask how far the cost savings would go towards paying for an organics pickup system.

The City of Winnipeg aspires to become more sustainable and subscribes to a climate action plan. Last Fall, councillors approved a plan to cut the City's emissions by 20 percent by 2020. Hence, in addition to the monetary cost analysis, the proposals before you should contain calculations of expected GHG emissions stemming from each of the alternatives contemplated. Councillors should ask for this information, just as the Public Utilities Board has asked Manitoba Hydro to calculate both the economic and global emissions impacts of alternative choices. Resource Conservation Manitoba (RCM) would be pleased to work with the city on this task.

We do not believe a proper collection system for the city can be designed on the spur of the moment. Yet we are told that time is of the essence for approving the seven-and-a-half year recycling contract. It would be a shame to lock in an inflexible commitment to weekly recycling pickups if that should prove suboptimal. At the very least a contract should be open enough to permit that question to be revisited.

RCM finds itself once again intervening at the 11th hour on a committee or council matter for decision within days of the release of a report by the public service. We don't like to be put in this position and I believe the public service and councillors don't like it either. There are two possible remedies for this situation. One is to allow a period for comment on and revision of a draft of the public service report to council. Another is to follow Toronto's example and create working groups of knowledgeable and concerned citizens to help plan and review proposals as they are shaped. Toronto has created both a 3Rs Working Group and a Residual Waste Working Group for these purposes. (See <http://www.toronto.ca/garbage/3rwg/index.htm>).

Thank you for considering RCM's comments on these matters.

Sincerely,

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