

Curbside recycling follies

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Curbside recycling is just like the smoking bylaw all over again. Everyone else has already done it, we know it's the right thing and we want to do it, but we're nervous. Maybe not yet, and maybe we should change the rules several times for no overall gain.

On the main principles, the vast majority agrees: banning smoking is good for our health; recycling is good for the environment.

On the smoking bylaw, council responded to the fears of a few people by delaying (and delaying, and delaying) the implementation as if that would somehow soften the imaginary blow to businesses.

Now that the ban is in place, the sky has not fallen, bars are busier than ever, and everyone agrees it was the right thing to do.

Now curbside recycling is also facing a debate on timing, and discussion on funding muddies the whole scheme.

In the early 1990s, Calgary chose community recycling depots (CRD) as a more complete and cost-effective solution over curbside recycling. CRD works very well when people use it. It has a lower environmental impact, since there are no special vehicle trips -- people tend to drop off the recyclables when they are going to the store anyway.

Compostables are conveniently contained in people's very own backyard composter. No extra emissions from curbside pickup and no need to fund a regional composting facility.

Unfortunately, people don't use it. After 15 years of the CRD system, Calgary's waste diversion rate is only 15 per cent. If you compare that with Edmonton's rate of 60 per cent, a curbside system starts to look worthwhile.

Since Edmonton began curbside recycling in 1988, Calgary has done little except demonstrate that Calgarians are too busy to bother participating in the depot system.

So, all in favour, but how do we fund it? Strangely, user fees are proposed. Public outcry about the cost of the program ensues. Council responds by reducing the recycling services offered in the program. This isn't what we want.

Calgary wants the full program at a reasonable cost. The original proposal before council was a monthly user fee of \$21 or \$252 per household per year.

Compare that with the average cost per single family dwelling in Edmonton of \$180. Council should be asking why the program would cost 40 per cent more in Calgary. How do private companies do the job for less right now? Why isn't council addressing these questions instead of blindly accepting the cost estimates of administration?

Instead of looking into the program costs, they redistribute them by proposing to fund garbage collection from property taxes and cutting back the recycling program by excluding organics. The actual cost of the program remains unchanged.

Then there's the spurious argument for user fees. Such fees are useful in two situations: either when not everyone receives a service, or to financially motivate a decrease in use.

For example, swimming pool fees mean those who don't swim don't pay as much as those who do, and metering water results in reduced consumption.

Neither reason applies to curbside recycling. Everyone needs waste and recycling services and get it regardless of how much they throw out or recycle. Keep the optical politics out of the real issue by funding the program through property taxes.

Other funding also needs to be investigated. Is the city eligible for funding under Alberta Environment's Resource Recovery Grant Program or Waste Management Assistance Program? Are public-private partnerships an effective way to reduce program costs? Should we implement bag fees for garbage and tax the behaviour we actually want to reduce?

It's time to remind our aldermen that their job is to find out what Calgarians want and ensure cost-effective implementation.

Calgary wants curbside recycling. Council needs to lead city employees to find innovative ways to reduce costs to the taxpayer.

Kate Easton takes her recyclables to the depot on her bike and returns home with a pannier full of groceries. Even other Better Calgary Campaign volunteers think she's a bit crazy. More info at www.bettercalgary.ca