

# Markham shines as a model city for waste diversion

By Royson James, Toronto Star, August 15, 2013



Markham residents are diverting 81 per cent of their waste from the landfill — an astonishing achievement and a symbol of what can be accomplished with inspired leadership.

The world-class diversion rate is among the best in Canada and North America — a full 15 percentage points higher than the single-family home rate in Toronto, from whom Markham borrowed many ideas.

“We are the best of the best, but we are going for zero waste,” said Councillor Carolina Moretti at a news conference celebrating the news Wednesday.

Politicians, city staff, the private waste contractor and citizens gathered in Chestertown Square, a Ward 4 neighbourhood parkette in the old village of Markham. That ward, east of Kennedy, north of Highway 407, is one of Markham’s largest, with 53,000 residents. Yet it has an incredible participation rate of 100 per cent.

Toronto’s combined diversion rate was only 52 per cent last year. Single-family homes divert two-thirds of their waste in Toronto. Apartment and condo dwellers divert only one-quarter, and that’s the main drag on the city’s 70 per cent diversion target.

Markham was already at 70 per cent when it embarked on a new strategy last April to raise the bar even higher. The city didn’t use magic or special garbage vacs or new high-priced technology or huge fees and taxes.

In fact, the city’s “Best of the Best,” its road map to 80 per cent diversion, used the Toronto waste diversion plan and only tweaked it a bit.

“It’s smart what Geoff Rathbone (former waste czar) did in Toronto. We followed that first launch in Etobicoke. The key difference is the clear garbage bag,” says Claudia Marsales, a waste manager so dedicated to the cause she’s dubbed “Queen of the Heap.”

In Markham, one of Canada’s richest municipalities, you can put out an unlimited number of bags of waste on garbage day, so long as everyone can see what’s in them. That is proving enough of a deterrent.

You can’t stash your recyclables in green or black garbage bags, like they do in Vaughan. You can’t pay to dump food scraps in a big bin, as Toronto, in effect, allows. And because there are no bag limits, there’s no need for bag tags.

As in Toronto, organic waste is collected weekly in the green bin; residual garbage and yard waste is picked up every other week. But blue box recycling is weekly. Apart from more frequent blue box collection — reflecting the small blue box compared to large Toronto’s blue bins — the main difference is the clear bag for non-recyclables and non-compostables.

Suddenly, Marsales said, participation spiked as residents knew the transparent bags revealed all they were throwing out. “You can’t hide it in a big cart. The neighbours see it. You can’t pay for more bags — besides, people do get used to user-pay (so it doesn’t necessarily change behaviour). It’s totally democratic. You can’t buy yourself out of it.”

The change, implemented in April, didn’t cost residents a penny more; garbage collection

remained on the property tax bill; but the small change has reaped big benefits.

Stuck with a diversion rate in the 70s for eight years, the new approach has pushed Markham above the 80 per cent nirvana. To get to zero waste, says Deputy Mayor Jack Heath, municipalities will need federal packaging legislation.

Toronto developed an entirely new system, made waste management a utility, imposed fees, and introduced bins that have created problems for many homes not on traditional lots. Markham's success suggests that a clear bag system might have been more productive for the diverse housing forms in the big city.

### Analysis Questions

1) In your own words, define the term **waste diversion**.

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2) What is Markham's diversion rate? \_\_\_\_\_

3) What is Toronto's diversion rate? \_\_\_\_\_

4) Explain what is preventing Toronto from reaching its 70% diversion target:

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5) What has been the secret to Markham's high diversion rate? Explain.

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6) Brainstorm 5 ways your family could help increase Toronto's diversion rate. Be specific. (i.e. recycling is not a good enough answer!!)

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