

Metroland

Market for plastics just not there

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By Erin Hatfield

DURHAM -- Recycling is big business and plastics, like other post-consumer products, are a commodity.

But, here in Durham, the plastic collected in the blue box is limited to bottles, juice and drink cartons and tubs and lids for things like yogurt, margarine and ice cream, leaving out toys, make-up jars, fruit and vegetable containers, take-out food containers, moulded bakery and plant trays.

"There were 860,000 tonnes of blue box material sold across Ontario in 2005," said Glenda Gies. "We are approaching the million-tonne mark collected and sold in Ontario and that is significant."

Ms. Gies, the executive director of Waste Diversion Ontario, is the former general manager of Durham Recycling and had a hand in developing the blue box program.

She said blue box material generates \$80 million in revenue a year in Ontario, the bulk from aluminum.

"I have been around and watched this grow into an industry," Ms. Gies said.

In the 1970s and '80s there was a market for aluminum, but none for used beverage cans or food cans. But, like the market for newspapers, beverage containers and tin cans grew, and Ms. Gies said she is confident plastics will find their place in the post-consumer world.

"I see that coming," she said. "It might take some years, but it definitely will happen."

According to Ms. Gies, work has been under way for the past 20 years to develop markets for plastic. The strongest market is for water and shampoo bottles, used to make carpets, CD covers, fleece and various types of moulded products.

There is a gradually increasing market for plastic tubs, lids and plastic film but, according to Ms. Gies, it takes a while to create a demand.

"It is a bit of a chicken and egg because you need municipalities to start collecting those different plastics, but not faster than the market capacity," she said.

Before Durham thinks about expanding its plastic collection it needs to assess both collection ability and all of the ramifications of adding and processing plastics.

"It is a matter of timing and Durham has to look at if there is sufficient market demand before collecting them," Ms. Gies said.

Mirka Januszkiewicz, Durham's director of waste management services, explained there are no immediate plans to directly expand the plastic collected in the blue box.

She confirmed that the reason some plastics are not part of the blue box program is because there is no market for them, but the potential for expansion is always under investigation.

"The new MRF (material recovery facility) will create an opportunity for us to separate them and find a market for them," she said. "But, right now, we cannot handle them in the blue box."

The new MRF, currently under construction, will provide greater flexibility and the Region will be able to focus on other plastics markets.

"We are trying to find partners in the industry," Ms. Januskiewicz said. "With plastics we are trying to focus on producer responsibility and that is the message I am getting from the plastics industry; they want to be responsible as well."

She said the Region is serious about dealing with plastics, in particular plastic bags.

For the past 10 months, the Region has and will continue to meet with industry and different chain stores to sort out starting a plastic bag-recycling program.

"We want to ensure we have one uniform program and that we are the first in Ontario to have this," she said. "The Region will hopefully involve all the stores in the Region of Durham."

She is confident a bag return can be up and running by the end of September, but in order for this program to work and it will require participation from industry and residents.

"Returning plastic bags is much more effective than us collecting them and doing something with them," Ms. Januskiewicz said. "It is true producer responsibility."