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Region looks at clear garbage bags

Seventy per cent waste diversion target by 2010

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By Reka Szekely

DURHAM -- The Region of Durham has aggressive plans to achieve a 70 per cent waste-diversion target, including introducing clear plastic garbage bags and reducing bag limits.

The 70 per cent target, by 2010, was adopted by council in January. Whitby has the highest diversion rate at 61 per cent. The regional average is 53 per cent.

"It's not going to be easy, we're going to have to use every trick in the book to get there," said Cliff Curtis, Durham's commissioner of works, at a committee meeting on Wednesday.

Plans include reducing the number of bags picked up every two weeks from the current four to three in April 2009 and two in January 2010. Additional bags would require tags. Residents now are allowed four bags biweekly or three bags per week, depending on the municipality.

As well, the Region is looking at requiring clear bags for garbage, as opposed to the current black or green ones, starting in October 2008. Mr. Curtis said Nova Scotia saw a 30 per cent jump in the amount of waste diverted from landfills after switching to clear bags.

"This is quite a significant way to increase recycling and diversion, but it won't be popular with a lot of people."

Whitby Councillor Gerry Emm said a 70 per cent diversion target was well received in his community, but had questions about the clear bag system.

"How would a homeowner handle those personal items that get thrown out, you know what I'm talking about," he said.

Mr. Curtis responded that one opaque grocery bag would be allowed in the clear bag. As well, people with medical conditions could ask for tags and use regular bags.

Other plans include adopting a region-wide uniform property tax rate for waste. Each municipality now pays for the costs in their own municipality, though the overall system is administered by the Region. In the 2008 budget, some municipalities like Ajax will see increases in the waste portion of their tax bill and some, like Scugog, will see decreases.

During the meeting, Ajax Mayor Steve Parish said he felt Ajax was being penalized for growth and increasing waste diversion.

Finance staff will prepare a report on a uniform policy.

The Region will also look at preparing a solid waste bylaw that would allow them to penalize those who don't follow the Region's waste rules. It would also curb scavengers who remove material from blue boxes.

"We're having an ongoing problem with people going around on blue box days stealing the material," Mr. Curtis said. "When people take things out of the blue box, it's costing all the taxpayers money."

That's because the cost of the recycling program is offset by selling the material.

Regional Chairman Roger Anderson raised concerns about the enforcement of the bylaw, especially in Whitby and Oshawa, where the municipalities run their own waste collection.

"I've got the strong feeling that we're all pretty supportive of these clear bags, but four people here won't have to implement them," said Mr. Anderson, referring to the four councillors from Whitby and Oshawa at the meeting.

As a result of the concerns, the bylaw and waste diversion plan, including the clear bags, was endorsed in principle by the committee. A report on the issue will come back to committee in April.

On the capital side, big-budget items include \$1.45 million for the remediation of the Brock and Oshawa landfills and \$2.4 million for Durham's share of the energy-from-waste environmental assessment and site studies. A business case for the proposed incinerator will be presented in April.

Property tax impact of waste budget and diversion rates

On a residential home valued at \$280,000, the 2008 waste budget means some residents will pay a little more on their property tax, some a little less. 2007 waste diversion rates are listed.

Ajax	\$19 more	57 per cent
Brock	\$7 more	41 per cent
Clarington	\$5 less	44 per cent
Oshawa	\$1 less	50 per cent
Pickering	\$14 more	56 per cent
Scugog	\$13 less	43 per cent
Uxbridge	\$2 less	45 per cent
Whitby	stays the same	61 per cent
Region average	\$4 more	53 per cent