

RDCO's new automated waste pick-up boasts sustainability advantages

by Darlene West

Municipalities in the Central Okanagan are pooling their waste collection dollars to launch an automated system that's worker-friendly, diverts more recyclable material from the landfill, and according to a test run, a hit with homeowners, too. The new system, expected to be up and running by the end of January 2009, follows a shift in many jurisdictions, including others in BC, to automated pick up.

Central Okanagan municipalities — which encompass more than 50,000 households in and around Kelowna, West Kelowna (formerly Westside), Lake Country, and Peachland — currently collect garbage and recycling under a combination of individual programs and joint ventures through the [Regional District of Central Okanagan](#) (RDCO).



The new automated system will employ garbage trucks equipped with mechanical arms to empty waste. Aside from the driver, no workers are needed to operate the trucks. Residents in the Central Okanagan will each be provided with special wheeled carts: one for garbage, a second for recyclables, and a third for yard waste. Plastic bags won't be needed for recycling, as recyclable materials will go directly into the carts.

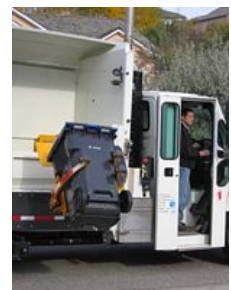
Carol Suhan, former waste reduction manager for the Regional District of Central Okanagan, says labor shortages triggered the shift to automated collection. Communities across western Canada have had trouble recruiting and retaining garbage handlers to work on trucks, she says. The job involves heavy lifting and workers are prone to injury and burn out. "It's a young man's job," she says. "They do it for ten years at most."

Regional demographics (fewer young people in the workforce) made the staffing problem especially acute in the Okanagan. "We knew it would be a long-term issue," says Suhan. The automated system expands the potential labor pool to include older workers and both women and men. The system also provides a safer work environment.

Yet another plus: automated collection offers the potential to incorporate new programs in the future. The ability to easily weigh and track recycling quantities at the curbside may open up options for residents to be rewarded for recycling. [RecycleBank](#) operates a rewards program that encourages recycling. Based on the amount of material they recycle, homeowners earn points that can be redeemed for products from local and national stores and businesses. RecycleBank has been implemented in the U.S. and is in discussions with a few communities in Canada.

Municipalities with automated collection also have the option of introducing "user-pay" systems, under which the fee charged for collection is determined by the size and number of carts. In BC, the City of Vancouver and the City of Prince George both have user-pay systems in place.

Automated waste collection has already been adopted by a handful of other communities in western Canada, and is becoming the standard in eastern Canada, the U.S., and Europe. In addition to the social benefits — such as safer, longer-term job opportunities for workers who operate the automated trucks — the new system will benefit the environment. Automated trucks collect garbage faster than their traditional counterparts, meaning fewer vehicles on the road. The carts have secure lids, reducing litter in the streets. And experience shows people are more apt to recycle when they don't have to buy plastic bags. Port Coquitlam's automated collection system, which is similar to the one being introduced in the Okanagan, boosted recycling rates by 35 percent. Another plus: yard waste, since it is collected separately and composted, is less likely to wind up in the garbage.



In the Central Okanagan, participants in a pilot project in 2007 overwhelmingly supported automated collection. And Suhan says the regional district's experience is attracting interest from other communities. "We've sent information on our project to about 15 other jurisdictions who want our data and research."

Alberta to recycle construction debris

Along with automated collection systems and other measures that encourage residential waste recycling, communities in BC and elsewhere in Canada are looking at ways to reduce waste from construction projects.

Alberta, for instance, will step up recycling efforts under a program to keep debris from building and demolition sites out of the province's landfills.

The provincial government, together with the Alberta Construction Association and the Canadian Home Builders' Association-Alberta, announced in October an agreement to develop a provincial stewardship program – the first of its kind in Canada – for construction and demolition waste. Wood, concrete, asphalt, drywall, and other debris from building and renovation projects accounts for about 23 per cent of the province's waste stream, with the average home construction generating between four and seven tonnes of waste.

Under the program being developed, an applicant for a building (or demolition) permit would be required to submit a deposit and to file a waste management plan detailing how waste materials from the project will be recycled. Builders and contractors would be eligible for rebates on their deposits in proportion to the amount of waste they divert from landfills.

Michael Nyikes, director of safety and technical services for the CHBA-Alberta, says the size of the deposit is still being worked out. He notes, however, that the cost of hauling waste to a landfill during construction of an average single family home is \$700 to \$1000. "The deposit will probably be more than that – large enough to entice builders to come back for a refund."

Bernal Ulsifer, chairman of the Alberta Construction Association, says the Alberta-wide approach will reduce compliance costs for builders since they won't have to learn a different regime for every community in which they operate. The province hopes to put legislation in place and implement the program by 2010.

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Many jurisdictions are looking at ways to divert wood and other construction and demolition debris from landfills, where it makes up a sizable component of buried waste. In a 2008 audit by the Waste Reduction Office in the Regional District of Central Okanagan, wood waste accounted for one-quarter of the total waste stream at the Glenmore Landfill, making up nearly 40 percent of industrial, commercial, and institutional waste and about 20 percent of waste from the demolition and land-clearing sectors.