

Recycling alternatives coming in response to outcry

York Region's recycling woes might soon see some relief.

Todd McCarthy, Ontario's Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks, announced Saturday the Province had heard the concerns of residents regarding the upcoming shift in how recyclable materials are collected and alternatives to the new, large blue bins that began rolling out this month, were being eyed.

"We have heard the concerns from residents in York Region about the sizing of recycling bins and the challenges it can pose, especially for those who are older or have mobility difficulties," said McCarthy in a statement.

"In response, we are working with Circular Materials and service providers like GFL to ensure appropriately-sized bins that meet residents' unique needs will be available."

The Minister's announcement came after nearly two weeks of meetings organized by the mayors of York Region's "Northern Six" (N6) communities.

Those were fraught discussions with Mayor Tom Mrakas saying prior to Saturday's announcement that concerns were "simply not being heard" by service providers.

Now that the Minister has stepped in, Mayor Mrakas told The Auroran on Tuesday that discussions continued at the start of the week and the N6 Mayors are looking at a timeline of "days, not weeks" to see the alternatives.

"We need answers now and we need solutions now - not tomorrow, today," he said. "This is a Provincial rollout, essentially, so at least it's encouraging that we have the commitment of the Minister and the Premier that they're on this and they want to ensure our residents, especially in the Northern 6, including the Town of Aurora, have options for bin sizes.

"It's days that we're looking for - some timelines, we're still obviously working with Circular Materials as well as GFL and the Minister to try and get those timelines so we can get that information out to the residents of our community because it's important that this happens immediately because we all know December 31 is coming quick.

"Dialogue is consistent and it's fast and furious, and we're all trying to achieve the same goal, which is the best outcome for our communities so they have options and choices in bin sizes."

Before the Minister's weekend announcement, the Mayors met with Circular Materials on November 14 and statements coming out of that meeting indicated frustration that, in the words of Mayor Mrakas, concerns "are simply not being heard."

This was reiterated in a statement issued Tuesday afternoon by the Northern 6 Mayors.

Over the past week, N6 Mayors have presented clear and consistent demands to Circular Materials for smaller Blue Bin options - a position that was validated and reinforced this weekend by both the Minister and the Premier of Ontario," they said. "Unfortunately, Circular Materials has not provided a firm and clear commitment on flexible bin size options for residents in N6 communities. This is particularly concerning given that other municipalities across the GTHA have successfully maintained their existing Blue Box sizes and collection schedules under the same Provincial producer responsibility framework. N6 Mayors will continue to press both the Province and Circular Materials to respect resident feedback, deliver smaller bin options, and improve communication about this rollout.

"To be clear: Circular Materials has dictated the terms of this program since its inception and has ignored input from municipal staff throughout the past year. N6 municipalities were never consulted on the size of the new bins or the changes to collection schedules

before the rollout began earlier this fall. In the absence of proper communication from Circular Materials, N6 Mayors and Town staff have worked to keep residents informed, answer questions, and advocate for practical, resident-focused solutions.

Circular Materials' Board of Directors is expected to meet later this week to discuss smaller bin options. If that meeting fails to produce an immediate and concrete commitment to implement smaller bins in N6 communities, N6 Mayors will formally request that the Province terminate its contract with Circular Materials and allow municipalities to resume control of their local Blue Bin programs ? including maintaining current bin sizes and service levels.

We will continue to keep residents informed of developments and will not stop advocating for fair, flexible, and responsive recycling options for all N6 communities.?

Concerns over the new program hit the Council table last week as well.

Communications between the Town of Aurora and residents to address concerns over upcoming shifts in how residential recycling is collected, including frustration over the new large containers that residents will be expected to use in the New Year, are key, according to Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Councillor Gallo attempted to underscore this point at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting by introducing a new motion to formally establish a process of communication on this issue between Town Hall and residents.

As the motion was introduced after the agenda for the November 11 meeting had been finalized, a vote to add it on the agenda failed on a vote of 4 ? 3, less than the two-thirds majority required, with Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillors Michael Thompson (Ward 4) and Harold Kim (Ward 6) the dissenting votes.

The Town is transitioning to a new Blue Bin Recycling Program [and] numerous residents have expressed concerns regarding the lack of clear information and guidance about this transition,? said Councillor Gallo, reading his motion into the public record. Current communication channels appear limited with residents being asked to reach out through the Mayor's Town email and? effective communication and staffing management are critical to ensuring residents are informed and are able to participate in the program successfully.?

The resolution called on Council to direct staff to ?actively participate in the communication process and ensure adequate resources are provided to support this transition? and that ?a process be established to manage and respond to residents' communications related to the new program, including a central point of contact and timeline for responses for staff.?

It also called for staff to look into how the shift adheres to Provincial regulations and fight for blue bins that are ?appropriate for residents, including with respect to size? and present a report to Council on the communications strategy, staff involvement, and resident engagement that took place prior to the bins rolling out earlier this month.?

After the vote was taken, Councillor Kim said he voted against the motion as discussions were set to continue between the company now contracted to pick up recycling, the mayors of York Region's N6 communities, and Provincial representatives.

Action, he said, ?can be held pretty quickly without the need to exhaust further staff resources, at least for this week.?

I just wanted to give those discussions a chance to play through and to hear? how that will end, so that's the reason why I voted ?no' to have that conversation at this time,? he contended.

Councillor Gallo, however, countered that by rejecting the motion, Council postponed a conversation that residents want to hear.

The motion on the floor was to allow those discussions? and the three of you voting against it stopped that discussion,? Councillor Gallo contended. ?Even if you were opposed to the motion, you could have allowed the rest of Council to have a discussion on its

merits and maybe you would have been convinced. Unfortunately, you chose not to have it on the agenda.

To this point, however, Mayor Mrakas said "our staff have done a tremendous job in communicating and getting out that messaging."

"Unfortunately, at this point in time, there's no update for our staff to put out until we get something out of Circular Materials," he concluded. "Once we do, our staff will know, all of you will know, and our community will know because our staff will put out that messaging as well."

By Brock Weir
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