

## The monster (blue bin) that ate downtown

New recycling carts work like a dream in the suburbs, but they're a nightmare in the core, Kelly Grant finds

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WITH FILES FROM JENNIFER LEWINGTON

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Take Larry Blake's mammoth new recycling bin - please.

As a resident of one of the steepest streets in the Beaches, Mr. Blake, 46, can't drag the wheeled cart up the 32 concrete steps in front of his house. He has abandoned the bin, unused, at the foot of his stairs until the city stops picking up the recycling he puts out in clear plastic bags.

"It's a raving eyesore," he says. "We're thinking of putting a 'take me' sign on it."

As acts of civil disobedience go, Mr. Blake's is minor. But by rejecting the 240-litre recycling bin, a contraption large enough to hold a grown man, Mr. Blake has joined the increasingly noisy revolt against phase one of Mayor David Miller's new trash regime.

**Print Edition - Section Front**



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Evidence of the rebellion is sprouting in dense, east-side neighbourhoods like Cabbagetown, Corktown and Riverdale, where city crews have already delivered the new recycling tubs to homes, many of which don't have laneways, garages or backyards in which to stash them. Residents have been forced to plunk the carts

out front like giant plastic weeds on their tidy lawns.

"[In] a historic neighbourhood," says Lee Garrison, president of the Don Vale Cabbagetown Residents Association, "it's totally unacceptable."

More than 100,000 Torontonians - a whopping one-third of the residents who've received bins so far - have called the city's bin hotline with questions and gripes since the solid-waste department began dropping off bins late last November. About 500 have complained forcefully enough to get a home visit from a member of the city's "bin team."

Angry Cabbagetown denizens nearly derailed a public meeting when they got a look at the size of the bins. Councillor Paula Fletcher, whose ward includes south Riverdale and Leslieville, has received more than 180 complaints, including a blank e-mail with a photo of a constituent head-first in a large bin, his legs poking out the top.

"The only other volume and level of [negative] response that I've ever had like this is around social-housing projects," Ms. Fletcher says.

The bin troubles are poised to migrate west. In the next few weeks, the city will ramp up delivery on the other side of Yonge. (The rollout is complete to all but 2,000 homes east of Yonge and has already begun on the west side of North York.) That means residents of other dense neighbourhoods, like the Annex, Parkdale and Queen West, are girding themselves for the hysteria that has already hit the inner-city's east side.

There is some irony in all this. The recycling-cart delivery was supposed to be the palatable phase of Toronto's new pay-by-what-you-throw garbage system, which officially launches in the city's more than 5,000 apartment and condo buildings July 1, and in its 500,000 single-family homes Nov. 1.

Torontonians, after all, treat garbage-reduction like a religion which decrees that it is sinful to toss a pop can in the trash and blasphemous to complain about separating your newspapers from your empty water bottles.

When the city introduced its green-bin program in 2002, residents embraced weeding banana peels and soiled diapers out of the trash with the zeal of the born-again. Trash bureaucrats initially predicted they would collect 175 kilograms of green-bin waste per household per year; today they collect about 220 kilograms.

"The 1 per cent who aren't happy [with the new recycling carts] all start off their complaint with, 'I love recycling ...' " says Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker, chair of the city's public works committee and an enthusiastic supporter of the new regime.

There are, of course, people who like the new blue bins as much as they like recycling, especially in former suburbs like Scarborough, where storage is convenient. The bins fit more material than blue boxes. They have lids to keep papers from blowing down the street on recycling day and wheels that make it easy to roll the bins on flat, clear pavement.

And, as Mr. Miller is quick to point out, of the approximately 300,000 homes that have received the carts so far, only 300 have found the bins so unworkable that the city granted them the option of using plastic bags, the most flexible of the city's back-up options for unhappy recyclers.

"This is massive change, a significant, positive change to Toronto," Mr. Miller says. "To roll out a program to 500,000 households, with three-fifths of that done so far, with a relatively small number of complaints, I

think is a significant accomplishment."

## **Fade to grey**

It remains to be seen how the city will greet the program's second phase, the delivery of the grey garbage bins whose size determines how much homeowners pay annually to have trash hauled away.

When those bins begin to land later this year, Trinity-Spadina Councillor Adam Vaughan sees a more complex set of problems ahead for constituents who live above shops on thoroughfares like Spadina Avenue. He signed on to a pilot project there allowing apartment dwellers to test different options, including bags.

But for Mr. Vaughan, the verdict on the new garbage program is already in. "The pilot project is trying to make this system, which doesn't work, work," he says, frustrated at what he sees as a suburban solution being imposed on a downtown urban environment.

Between the new garbage bill and the new program's restrictive rules - homeowners can only exceed their bin limit by four free bags per year, for example, something critics say will prompt illegal dumping - Mr. De Baeremaeker is bracing for complaints.

"People won't like it," he admits. "But it's like some horrible-tasting cough syrup. You may not like it, but it's good for you."

The new regime is "good for you" in that it's designed to whip into shape the garbage scofflaws who don't recycle religiously, with financial incentives serving as the cat-o'-nine tails.

The goal of the program is to divert 70 per cent of Toronto's garbage from the dump by 2010, a target that Geoff Rathbone, the general manager of the city's solid-waste department, admits will be tough to meet. (In 2007, Toronto diverted 42 per cent of its waste, unchanged from 2006.)

The system's financial incentives are straightforward: People who throw more in the trash pay more to have it hauled from the curb.

Today, garbage pick-up is paid for out of the property-tax base, which means the more you pay in property taxes, the larger the share you pay of Toronto's \$183.5-million solid-waste budget.

The city had a second motive for choosing the volume-based approach. It needed the extra cash. The plan requires an additional \$54-million per year to aggressively expand diversion programs, including bringing the green bin to apartments.

Mr. Rathbone knows some residents will find the volume-based system confusing and restrictive. He wants them to consider the "big picture."

"They have to recognize that the city will likely never have another landfill within our jurisdiction," he says.

That reality drives the new plan. Right now, Toronto sends an average of 74 trucks of trash daily to a Michigan dump. In 2011, the city will start dumping garbage at Green Lane, the southwestern Ontario landfill Toronto purchased for \$220-million last year. If Toronto's diversion rate stays at 42 per cent, Green Lane will be full by 2024. If the city hits its 70-per-cent target, the dump will last an additional decade.

Mr. Rathbone and Mr. De Baeremaeker say the new system is more even-handed than the old one. It

charges residents by how much garbage they throw out, not by the assessed value of their homes.

"It's very fair," Mr. De Baeremaeker says. "Even for somebody who's in a large family, I'm very comfortable saying to that large family, 'Well, you pay more for water because your family drinks more water. That's fair. You pay more for bananas because your family eats more bananas. That's fair.' "

Fair or not, the new bins still annoy some residents in pockets like Cabbagetown. There, local councillor Pam McConnell and solid-waste staff have worked to find house-to-house solutions, such as allowing neighbours to share a bin, or, if alternatives are impossible, letting homeowners stick with clear plastic bags.

"I think that we've come up with some reasonable solutions to allow this to move forward because the important part is to be on board for diverting 70 per cent as quickly as possible," Ms. McConnell says.

Still, not everyone is satisfied. In Riverdale, there's Sister Catherine Yaskiw, 50. She has had to find someone else to pull the new colossal carts to the curb from behind Holy Eucharist Ukrainian Catholic Church on Broadview Avenue. They're too heavy for her to handle, even on clear pavement. "How are you supposed to pull it in the winter?" she asks. "Are they going to put skis on the wheels for me?"

In Corktown, Chris Hutcheson has resigned himself to parking his new recycling cart on his porch. The 55-year-old management trainer is not happy about it - "it's ugly," he says - but with only an inch of air separating his Trinity Avenue row house from its unattached neighbour, he would have to drag the bin across the hardwood floors of his 14-foot-wide home to store the bin in his backyard.

In Cabbagetown, Randy Brown, the 64-year-old founder of the Cabbagetown Arts and Crafts Festival, lives in a row house. He helped broker the deal that allowed Cabbagetown residents with no laneways or garages - himself included - to use plastic bags.

Last week, the city accidentally deposited a monster blue bin on his lawn anyway.

"I think the whole thing is absolutely shameful," Mr. Brown says.

## Frequently asked Qs

If I live in single-family home, what will I pay

for garbage?

Residents who select Toronto's smallest garbage bin, a 75-litre container equal to one green garbage bag, pay the lowest bill: \$199 per year. Medium bin users pay \$248 per year, large users \$342 and extra-large users \$399. Those figures will rise by 3.5 per cent per year.

However, a technical amendment to provincial legislation is needed to remove garbage from the property-tax base. In the meantime, City Hall will provide residents with a \$209 annual credit on their new combined water and garbage bill, meaning small-bin users will actually receive a \$10 rebate.

What happens if I live

in an apartment?

You won't be billed for trash collection, but the owner of your building will. The city is hoping that charging apartment owners by volume will prompt them to make it easier for tenants to recycle.

Say I have a party. What happens if I have more trash than I can fit in the garbage bin I've selected?

The city allows homeowners to put four free bags per year at the curb. Each additional bag costs \$3.10. The charge will be added to residents' garbage bill.

Why didn't the city just switch to bag tags?

The new bins are equipped with handles recycling trucks can lift automatically. The city predicts this will make garbage pickup 10 per cent more efficient and cut down on injuries among garbage workers.

What if after a few months I discover I need a bigger

or smaller recycling or garbage bin?

In the case of the blue recycling bins, the city is offering one free size exchange between now and Nov. 1. In the case of the garbage bins, downsizing is free, but upsizing costs \$10 for the first three months after residents receive their bins. After that, the cost to upsize a garbage bin is \$20.

Does all this mean

the city will be collecting my trash/recycling

more often?

No. Recycling pickup and garbage pickup will continue to happen every two weeks.

*Kelly Grant*

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