

Testing our recycling IQ, and patience

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Faced with the blue box, green bin, grey box – not to mention leaf bags, yard waste, composters and waste depots – Toronto-area residents need the patience of Job or the wisdom of Solomon to properly do their bit for the environment.

Amazingly, residents plow through the confusing array of waste-management orders as city hall constantly changes the rules. Or citizens give up and contaminate the products the city collects for recycling and composting.

All day yesterday the environmentalists faced off with Tim Hortons, Pepsi, plastic makers and the like at city hall in a classic tug-of-war, councillors taking turns aiding and abetting their favourite side. Within two hours of a tedious day-long debate, a simplistic question emerged: Can consumers be educated, and trusted, to remove the lid from their hot beverage before discarding the empty cup in the recycling bin?

City officials are saying no. And they point to the one million hot drink cups discarded each day in Toronto – most of them pitched into the garbage and shipped to the landfill. Apparently, Toronto would need special machinery and/or garbage pickers to separate cups and lids. Cost: \$5 million.

Together, plastic and paper are not easily recycled. As such, the city wants industry to produce a hot drink container with a paper lid. Industry wants the city to spend money for the machinery.

"No IQ, no test, no PhD. Just enjoy your coffee, put it in the blue bin. That's how simple we want it to be," explains Glen DeBaeremaeker, the city's waste czar.

Tugging back on behalf of restaurant and food services companies, Stephanie Jones says: "Torontonians are smart enough to learn how to take the lid off their coffee cups."

If only it were that simple.

The city says the coffee cups and lids, retail plastic bags and clear plastic "clamshell" containers used for berries and eggs are "unnecessarily contributing to the depleting of the capacity" of the city dump.

Absolutely. Some 458 million plastic bags go to landfill from Toronto each year. Combined with other polystyrene packaging and takeout food containers, each Torontonian generates almost 8 kilograms of such waste per year, a huge volume considering these materials are near-weightless.

The city is rightly concerned. But why it would single out the hot drink container and not the cold drink container is puzzling. Do we expect the consumer to separate the lid from the cup of cola or other soft drink? Do we ask for the straw to be removed from a tetra pack? And because we do, should we not expect the same of the consumer of hot drinks?

Granted, the volume of hot drink containers is greater. But the consumer is anything but dumb and incapable of navigating ever-changing instructions.

Remember when we could not put foam containers or aluminum foil or margarine tubs in the blue box? They used to tell us to take the cap off bottles; now they want them on – but only if it is a plastic bottle. If it's glass, they want the lids discarded. Go figure.

It's getting to be too much. With the advent of the new big blue bins, many now feed Big Blue with all clear plastics, clamshells, lids from hot and cold drinks, secured to the cups or pried apart.

As such, the city is rightly concerned. Some 20 years ago, the province bribed municipalities to accept the second-best option of recycling rather than reduction. Retailers were the big winners. City taxpayers have been paying ever since.

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