

Beyond the Blue Box

A story of the FGCA's plastics recycling program, as presented at a special recycling volunteer thank-you dinner in November, 2009

By Peter Ronald
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Thank you so much for having me here as a presenter tonight.

I want to relate the successful experience we have enjoyed going *Beyond the Blue Box* in Fairfield. It models a successful triple-bottom line approach.

I want to tell you what the project looks like, where it came from, what some of our challenges have been and are, and then I want to listen to the rest of your presenters, and learn where we might go next.

I am speaking on behalf of the Fairfield Community Association, sponsor of this effort, and specifically on behalf of the Plastic Recycling sub-committee of the FCA's Environment Cttee., and even more specifically, on behalf of the site coordinators and hundreds of volunteers that made this project happen.

I do not have a PowerPoint presentation for you, just my words. There are some great pictures taken over the years, and even more moments that should have been captured photographically

However, I ask you to visualize our project in a way that pictures and graphs and printed phrases might not.

Imagine not one, but five quiet neighbourhood locations, coming to life on a Saturday morning, first with one volunteer distributing a stack of traffic cones; then another volunteer carting and assembling a table or two.

Then eight or so bag-buddies bloom as more workers busy themselves to prepare the site, arranging two children's blue plastic swimming pools (used as sorting tubs) and erecting signs directing traffic and advising of suggested donation levels, and otherwise preparing for a crush of clients, who now appear from all directions, on foot, on bikes and in cars hauling great loads of plastics. Many if not all leave a cash donation to help make it all work.

The ensuing hour or two of pandemonium is barely contained chaos, punctuated by brief moments of calm, as bags full of bags and packaging and trinkets are poured out and sorted, and the pools fill and empty like madly pulsing tides. And then the site is disassembled and silence returns.

All right, that is as poetic as I am going to get.

For fully nine years now, volunteers with the FCA Plastics project have provided just such a community-recycling programme in our neighbourhood.

When we began, no plastics were accepted at the curbside. Glass, tin and newspapers, yes, but no plastics were accepted at all. And at that time we were only taking hard plastics, none of the eight or ten other products we accept now.

We knew that our landfill was at risk of filling with all of the QUOTE-UNQUOTE “disposable” stuff of modern life.

We knew about entrepreneurs turning waste plastics to plastic lumber. Indeed, we knew that one such business was located just up the peninsula on Keating Crossroad.

And most importantly, we knew Roger Smeeth had already embarked on such a project, albeit a more modest one in South Jubilee.

It is important to add that as conscientious citizens, we were buoyed by the environmental awareness that had washed through our community and the province during the preceding decade, with concerns about

- protection of old growth forests,
- the urgent need to conserve water and protect watersheds, locally in the Sooke Hills and elsewhere,
- the ongoing issue of sewage pollution, and the Fate of the Straits
- fisheries collapse, unimaginable, had happened on the East Coast of Canada and was now coming to the Pacific salmon,
- even, yes we discussed it at the time, global warming.

There was great awareness, even then, of all these things. Awareness, but not always or often action.

Our initial objective was to divert plastics from the landfill, realizing that plastics are highly refined petroleum products that are at once, and despite their appearance of “disposability”, a problem for our size-limited landfill and also a feedstock of potential value for reuse for valuable products.

Because this was a community-initiated project, we were not motivated by money, but by values. The key values were environmental and community spirit. Neighbourliness, you might say.

We all live in a pretty spectacular part of the world. A lot of us just wanted to actively give something back, through our time and our effort.

Although we have had to occasionally change the instructions for what is and what is not accepted at the depot, and have fine-tuned the locations and opening times, **for nine years** we have maintained a remarkably consistent presence and service for our community.

The Plastic Recycling Project was accomplished in partnership with four local organizations, which provided us with our depot locations and places to store our materials between collection days.

- Fairfield Community Association
- The Canadian Red Cross
- Fairfield United Church
- St. Mathias Anglican Church

(Perhaps I should acknowledge my own basement garage as the 5th partner location, for the Olive Street Common Depot.)

But our most important partners, our business partners, was first Planet Recycling, and for the past seven years, Pacific Mobile Depots.

I will not/can not comment on the financial or business aspects of this arrangement in terms of how PMD have made it work, or to what degree they have benefited from our shared effort. The depots are run on a donation basis, with a suggested donation tied to the amount and kinds of plastics being dropped off.

PMD provides staff, bags and arrange the truck that collects the sorted plastics at the end of the day. We currently have a simple arrangement of revenue sharing that returns 20% of the donations collected to the FCA.

After a first-year community grant from the Shell Environment Fund, the project **has been a modest profit centre every single month of its history.**

In addition to the cash benefit to the FCA, the project extends and makes visible the FCA every month at five sites around Fairfield & Gonzales neighbourhoods.

It provides a **visible, and positive, values-based expression** of the FCA's mission, that being "to enhance the quality of life in Fairfield by involving community members in identifying and acting on the needs of area residents".

I want to elaborate on this idea of values by relating the objectives of the project in more detail. These were fairly ambitious at the outset.

1. We wanted to divert hard plastics away from the Hartland Landfill. At the time, the landfill had been recently expanded with the draining of Heel Lake. This was a real shock to some of us.
2. We wanted depots to be local enough that our clients could easily walk to them.
3. We wanted the depots to be places where people would great friends and neighbours and get caught up with news of their lives, perhaps even places where we could display information on some other issues (like those I mentioned earlier) **to engender a conversation about conservation.** (In fact we are too busy accepting bags and bags of plastics to do anything much more than say hello and exchange some practical advice about what is and what is not acceptable at the depot.)

4. We wanted to avoid shipping the plastics overly far away. Air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, from truck and ferry transport was to be avoided.
5. We wanted to know where the plastics were going, not simply feed it into the mysterious and darkly rumoured world of the lower mainland's waste disposal industries.
6. We wanted to create local employment and economic activity if we could.
7. We wanted to do all of this and serve the FCA's mission of enhancing the quality of life by involving community.

So a pilot project was conceived that would run for four months in the summer of 1999 at Eberts Park, an out of the way location, near the southwest corner of Ross Bay Cemetery, a block from the ocean. We counted every bag of garbage and surveyed participants repeatedly

Within two months of initiating the pilot project we knew we had a winner.

Five sites – Five site coordinators: The Plastics committee

We identified five good sites and had the good fortune to attract committed, loyal leaders to anchor the depots. I would like to acknowledge them: Gerry Howell Jones, Neil Vickers, Phil Fawcett, Helen Lindo, Jean Siemens and myself. Gerry is really to blame for all of this—he was still is the ringleader.

Phil Fawcett by the way is no longer a site coordinator, being in his early nineties now, but he was the coordinator for five years and still is an active volunteer at Sir James Douglas site.

Four of these sites are still running today. And I do mean running because these days we are being flooded with recycling.

As I say, we have loved running the program all these years, but now we are being overwhelmed by our success and the Green wave of environmental awareness that is boosting our volumes enormously.

Is this latent demand or are people consuming more and taking advantage of our program to help assuage their green guilt?

Challenges

There have been challenges over the years, and again now we face some issues that strike at the core of our effort.

We worked to expand the range of plastic products we accept. This is a reflection of an emerging business market that was changing all the while and the needs and abilities of our partner to accept and find an end use for the products.

When the CRD began accepting limited plastics in the blue box we polled our clients and found an overwhelming desire to have our project continue.

In our third year we started to accept “soft plastics” which meant bags, as well as Styrofoam packaging, foam chips & foam food containers.

That year we also instigated an additional sort to separate out #3 Poly vinyl chloride and #6 Polystyrene, because the quantities, or rather proportions and the characteristics of those plastics were negatively affecting the plastic lumber products at the other end of the production chain.

We are facing this problem again now with biodegradable bags from Thriftys and other stores because they are “contaminating” the true plastics.

In 2005 we started accepting clean gable-top and TetraPac milk, soymilk and soup containers, all things that couldn't be recycled elsewhere.

At the same time, we expanded to include polyurethane foam (e.g. clean carpet underlay) and polyethylene foam (used for packaging). We now take coffee bags and some other foil products, and also e-waste (answering machines, computers and monitors and so on).

We struggle with how to communicate these changes in the recycling market to our clients, to keep it sufficiently simple, and always pleasant for them to make the effort to come to us, rather than just throwing things away or using the CRD blue box, often inappropriately.

We have grappled with how to **maintain our values and goals in this project** when our business partner would prefer fewer and larger sites, operationally more efficient for them; more polluting and less community oriented for us.

And we have suffered from volunteer and coordinator burn-out. Again, a simpler business model might help that, but we feel it would also change the experience for our clients and for our sponsor.

And I have to add, we have felt somewhat ignored or overlooked by the CRD, despite our own somewhat nominal efforts to communicate with them about our project. We were never approached for advice or as a model of a successful project, curbing landfill waste and growing awareness of solid waste issues.

We did help spawn projects in adjacent neighbourhoods, and we have helped a small business grow to the point that they are expanding to other parts of the province.

And we have recycled a lot of plastic!

So my conclusion:

Behaviour changes slowly, but it does change.

A values-based project of this kind is a guaranteed winner if you have the support of individual and institutional partners.

Recycling feels good.

How else to explain the surging numbers of participants and the willingness of volunteers to come out in all weather to make this work.

Community matters.

People yearn for connection and simple opportunities like this are one way to break through the barriers that separate us in our homes and work life, and allow us to express ourselves and our values.

Finally, we need to ask, what is the END GAME?

How do we start emphasizing REDUCE, instead of RECYCLE?

And - how can our regional and senior governments help guide this process in accordance with the values that we all hold paramount, those of a clean sustainable environment and safe, convivial communities?

Thanks again.

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