

NEWS FEATURE

WASTE REDUCTION

Recycle, redux, report: Part 4

BRENT RICHTER
Staff Writer

Editor's note: This week, Coast Reporter presents the final part in a series on recycling and waste reduction. This week looks at the role depots play in local recycling.

Curbside recycling pick-up has the clear advantage of convenience when it comes to getting household recyclable goods out of the waste stream. But can convenience and zero-waste happen at the same time?

Not according to Buddy Boyd, co-owner of Gibsons Recycling Depot. He says a well-planned depot-based recycling system is mandatory for zero-waste, and convenience and cost should not be the determining factors.

"It's our feeling as environmentalists first, contractors second, that planet Earth has to be the benefactor here. Not the convenience of the public, not how cheaply it can be done but how we actually have a positive impact on the planet," Boyd said.

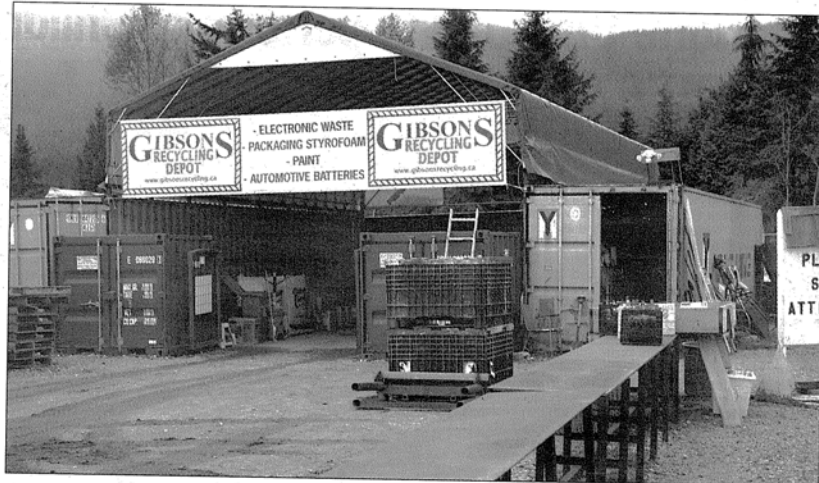
He argues on a pragmatic level that depots offer services that curbside collection simply can't, and on a philosophical level, that depots change the way we think about waste.

The basics

Unlike curbside, depots rely on residents (or businesses) bringing their recyclable materials to a depot location. Depots can be staffed, whereby attendants are on site to assist with sorting, making sure materials end up where they should and that no one is leaving household garbage behind. Otherwise, they can be unstaffed, making them cheaper to run, but there is not much by way of oversight and assistance. Typically, depot owners then find processors to sell their products to and begin the industrial recycling process.

Pros and cons

As Brock Macdonald, executive director of the Recycling Council of British Columbia (RCBC), points out, there are some things depots are just plain good at doing.



Gibsons Recycling Depot's main sorting tables, storage and zero-waste store. The depot focuses on diverting waste through resource recovery. BRENT RICHTER PHOTOS

He said there are several examples of "one-stop drop" depots in the province that serve their communities remarkably well, particularly if they are well designed, centrally located and accessible.

He added there is likely a growing role for depots to play as the province steps up extended producer responsibility (EPR) and bans items from landfills. There are currently six EPR programs up and running in the province including one for old electronics. He said it is more practical for these items to be dropped off at depots than to be collected from homes, especially large items like old TVs.

"Unless you want to make an aquarium out of it, there's not much else you can do with it," Macdonald said. "You really need a more commercial, semi-industrial site for that rather than curb pick-up."

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BUDDY BOYD

Conversely, Macdonald said, curbside pick-up is suited for efficiently collecting common household recyclables in dense communities, and it ups participation rates.

But he adds there is no "silver bullet solution" and that it is up to each community to consider its situation and find what will work best and, often, a mix of both models is ideal.

Resource recovery

Boyd's enhanced depot, he says, incorporates all of the "three Rs" of waste reduction — reduce, reuse and recycle.

He argues you need all three and an emphasis on pulling more resources out of the waste stream if you are ever going to live in a zero-waste community.

"There's three Rs in that, but most communities only use the 'recycle.' 'Reuse' is virtually never used and 'reduce' is not important for anybody because they're going to throw curbside at you and you just throw it in the tote and it magically disappears," he said.

Boyd adds that heaps of material are buried or incinerated every day around the province, and residents and industry are losing valuable resources in the process.

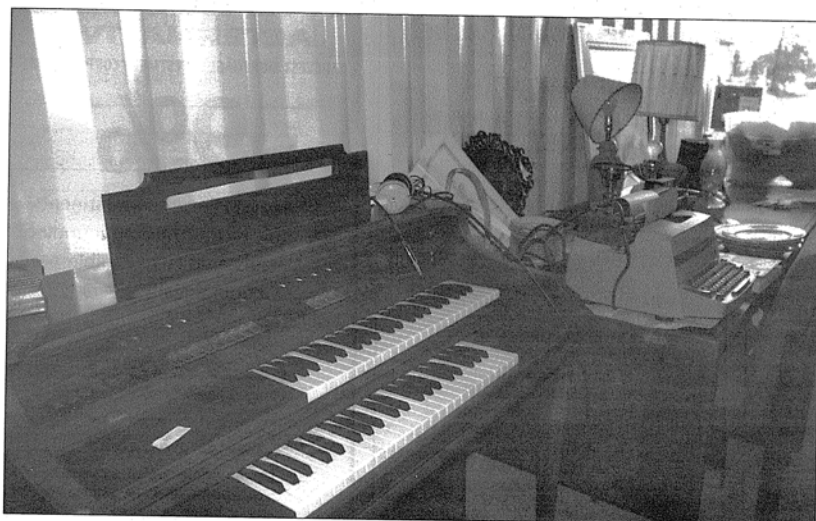
Recovering those unused resources that might be disguised as trash and making them available to the public or industry is what Gibsons Recycling Depot is now specializing in.

Last year, Boyd found himself in demand as a consultant for other regional districts and private businesses when he invested in a polystyrene densification machine — a machine that takes the material, better known by its trade name Styrofoam, and compresses it down in a 90 to one ratio.

What is left are bricks of resin that are in demand by processors to be remade into things like picture frames, crown moulding, CD cases and other products. Boyd said he has sold and shipped about 1,100 cubic metres of polystyrene in the last year.

Other products like paint also have a chance at a second life. Residents can drop in and pick up unused paint for their own projects. He said there are a number of professional painters around town who are regulars.

Residents can also bring their garbage there, whereupon Boyd's staff "aggressively attack" it and find anything with a possible reuse, most of which winds up in Gibsons Recycling Depot's zero-waste store. The store is comprised of a series of shipping containers filled with used-but-in-good-condition items that sell for a tiny fraction of what similar new items would cost.



Is that a Wurlitzer? It might have wound up buried in Sechelt Landfill if Gibsons Recycling staff didn't pull it from the waste stream. Buddy Boyd says you can never reach zero-waste unless you offer a service where almost any item has a chance to be reused rather than thrown out.

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"It's amazing what people will throw away just because they don't like the colour anymore or it's not trendy," he said. "Everything you see in those containers was destined for the landfill, except we attacked it, aggressively, not passively. We don't want to transfer garbage. We want to reduce garbage. We want to help educate and we want to reuse and pass along the chain things that would normally be thrown away."

Mairi Welman, communications director for the Recycling Council of British Columbia, says depots that offer resource recovery like Gibsons Recycling tend to do quite well when they operate in small communities. She points to the Gulf Islands as an example where residents must pay the costs of shipping garbage off the island, so there is a financial as well as an environmental incentive to make sure waste is kept to a minimum.

And the Sunshine Coast Regional District (SCRD) is not completely behind in the resource recovery game. The board recently voted to include a resource recovery facility as part of a transfer station in Pender Harbour when the landfill reaches capacity and will be ordered closed by the province.

Staffed versus unstaffed

When the SCRCD voted to begin designing requests for proposal (RFP) last spring, the board opted for curbside pick-up and unstaffed depots, but left the RFP "wide open" so contractors could bid with an array of different options for both. Boyd said it was short-sighted to not invite bids from enhanced depots, which he argues provide far better service and are not prone to being treated as dumpsites.

One man who can tell you from experience that having staff on site is preferred is Ken Lee, manager of GRIPS recycling depot in Pender Harbour. GRIPS is a non-profit contracted by the SCRCD to run a staffed depot to serve all of Area A.

Lee said GRIPS staff typically find non-recyclable items or plain old garbage left at the gate when the facility is closed on Wednesdays. "If you had an unstaffed depot, you would see that constantly because unfortunately there are people who would do anything just to save themselves \$5 [in landfill fees]," he said.

Dion Whyte, the SCRCD's manager of sustainability services, said this can happen even at the SCRCD's depots in Sechelt and Gibsons, which are staffed part-time.

"The perennial issue with unstaffed depots is the nuisance factor and unsightliness and people using it for a free-for-all dumping ground and what that means in constantly having to be there to clean it up," he said.

But both Whyte and Macdonald say it is possible for unstaffed depots to be clean and effective; it's just a matter of design and public education.

Depots and zero-waste

Zero-waste, the concept of taking everything in the waste stream and finding a way to reuse or recycle it, is a big thought to get a hold of, but Boyd argues it's entirely possible. He said it just means making some changes. In addition to government regulating what can and cannot be tossed in the waste stream and industry taking on the responsibility of manufacturing in ways that ensure the products do not need to end up at a landfill, there is also a role for us, the consumers.

The consumers' role, Boyd argues, is having to confront the ways we consume and waste — and depots offer a chance to do that. He said simply putting a bin of mixed recyclables at the curb is an "abdication of that responsibility."

This is in addition to the depots' ability to take items



Bricks of polystyrene resin wait to be shipped. Left in the soil, the product will never biodegrade, but it can be reprocessed back into new products.

BRENT RICHTER PHOTO

out of the waste stream and get them back in the hands of wanting consumers.

Wrap up

Put it to the curb, drop it off at the depot or leave it in the trunk of your car: these are the options. Next week,

from June 4 through 9, residents in Halfmoon Bay, Roberts Creek, Elphinstone and West Howe Sound may find their phones ringing with surveyors on the other end of the line, asking for residents' thoughts on recycling. It's part of the SCRCD outreach on where it should be taking recycling for the years to come.

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