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The History and Future of Recycling in Woodstock

Trash Talk is a regular feature about waste management and recycling brought to you by the Public Works Department of the City of Woodstock.

In 1978, a private contractor approached the City of Woodstock with a unique request: he wanted to pick up the newspapers at the curb. The city easily agreed and for one year all went smoothly. When the contractor abruptly decided to quit, Woodstock was left with no choice but to pick up the papers themselves. The city supplied a truck and driver while the Oxford Regional Centre offered the manpower to throw the newspapers onto the back of the truck. The new system was a success and continued throughout the 1980s, when they added aluminum cans and glass, and in the 1990s the collection grew to include plastic, cardboard and boxboard. It's hard to believe what began as a one-man operation now has more than six trucks and trailers, and the volume of materials has rapidly increased as more and more people adopt the "reduce, reuse and recycle" philosophy.

What people don't see is what happens after the recycling has been collected and is taken to the processing plant. Currently Woodstock has its own Materials Recovery Facility (MRF), where workers sort the material that comes in from the recycling trailers. Homeowners sort their items into seven different streams: cans, bottles, plastics, newspapers, boxboard, cardboard and fine paper. At the MRF, the material is further refined – glass is divided into coloured glass and clear glass, plastics are sorted into different streams, and there is a machine that sorts the tin cans from the aluminum cans. The people who work at the processing plant do almost all of this sorting manually. After the material is sorted and processed, it is baled and shipped to a final market.

Today, the increase in material has brought Woodstock to a hard realization: our 25-year-old recycling system is no longer equipped to handle the volume of material. Plastics alone have increased by 80% from 2005 to 2006, and the city continues to grow and develop with each passing year.

Now, like so many other things, it's time for the recycling program to move onward and upward.

Starting mid-year, the processing plant will be converted to a transfer station, where the material will be sent pre-sorted and pre-processed in bulk to a larger processing facility. Instead of seven different categories, there will only be two: fibre (anything paper) and containers (all plastic, glass, aluminum). At the larger materials recovery facility the material is, for the most part, mechanically sorted – there are mechanisms and blowers that sort the material into different processing lines.

And what does this mean for Woodstock residents? The Public Works department believes the new system will be easier and more cost-effective for the city and homeowners alike. Stay tuned to Trash Talk for everything you need to know about the recycling program rollout.



Workers manually sort plastics arriving at the recycling plant.