

Blue box: At 25 years old, how is it doing?

Mar. 16, 2006. 01:00 AM
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Ontario's ubiquitous blue box is — can you believe it — 25 years old. An entire generation has grown up with the blue box as a part of the family. For millions of people in Ontario, recycling has become as routine as brushing teeth and shovelling the driveway. The blue box is about diverting from landfill the natural resources we use to make consumer products and packaging so they can be recycled into a plethora of new products.

Recycling decreases demand for new raw materials, slows down demand for landfill space, saves energy and reduces greenhouse gases.

In its 25th year, we can celebrate the blue box program as a made-in-Ontario solution to reducing waste.

Perhaps more significantly, we can embrace its untapped potential to make a greater contribution to our environment.

The blue box was invented in 1981 by a coalition of strange bedfellows comprising environmental, beverage and waste industry innovators.

Intrigued by a handful of small, but successful voluntary recycling programs that picked up articles for reuse at individual houses, they persuaded the city of Kitchener to try a pilot project to collect a basic set of recyclables from householders at curbsides. They needed a container to hold the materials — and the blue box was born.

Over the next 10 years, the blue box swept the province, with Ontarians embracing the idea of doing their part for the environment.

Delegations from around the globe converged on Ontario to see how the system worked and learn how they could launch similar programs.

In 1989, Ontario's blue box system won the first-ever United Nations Environment Award for its unique contribution to fighting pollution.

Today, almost all of Ontario's 4.6 million households have access to recycling systems whether they are curbside collection, apartment bins or municipal drop-off depots.

Each year in Ontario, we recycle more. Between 1996 and 2003, the amount of recyclables recovered increased by 47 per cent, outstripping population growth by 27 per cent.

In 2004, we recycled nearly 824,000 tonnes of material, representing about 55 per cent of the 1.5 million tonnes of printed paper and packaging estimated to be generated within Ontario households.

Ontario's environment ministry has a target of 60 per cent diversion by 2008, a target we hope to reach and exceed.

Part of the reason for the success of the blue box program in Ontario is a cost-sharing arrangement between industry and municipalities.

Companies producing packaging and printed paper that are managed in the municipal waste system pay annual fees to an organization called Stewardship Ontario.

The fees are based on the amount and type of material introduced into the marketplace. Stewardship Ontario then distributes the money (some \$81 million so far) directly to provincial municipalities and organizations that operate blue box programs.

Today, municipalities and industry work as partners, looking for ways to make the entire collection and processing system more cost-effective.

A program Stewardship Ontario oversees called the Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) Fund allows municipalities to conduct projects to help reduce the cost of recycling programs, to increase recycling rates and to find "best practices" in residential recycling. The results of key projects are available broadly through another innovation called the Stewardship Ontario Knowledge Network, an online, interactive website that allows municipal waste managers to find information and ideas on how to operate better programs for their communities.

Since the E&E fund was launched in July 2004, about \$6.9 million has been committed to 46 municipal projects.

It's safe to say that at age 25, Ontario's blue box program is here to stay. And, while it has accomplished a great deal, it's also fair to say there is more work to do.

We must increase overall recycling rates — particularly in apartment complexes, in offices and in public spaces.

We must broaden markets for blue box materials to stabilize revenue sources for municipalities to help cover program costs.

We must continue to identify ways to improve cost efficiencies in recycling programs across the province.

But the bigger picture is that the blue box is the catalyst for broader programs that address diversion for other types of consumer products and packaging waste. While we can be justifiably proud of our blue box program in Ontario, the fact is it is just the beginning.

Dennis Darby is chair of Stewardship Ontario.