



Markham Environmental Advisory Committee (MEAC) Report on Clear Bag Awareness Campaign

By Karl Lyew (May 14, 2013)

Summary

MEAC was invited to participate in two public awareness campaigns to help highlight the City's most recent environmental initiatives regarding waste management. The **MEAC Earth Day Awareness Event** at the Markville Mall on April 20, 2013 served as the first opportunity for MEAC members and the City's Waste Management staff to interact with the community to help answer questions surrounding the City's transition to clear bag garbage disposal. The event was very well attended and provided both MEAC and the City's Waste Management group the opportunity to hand out information and free sample clear bags to the public, as well as answer any questions people might have had regarding the city's clear bag program. MEAC estimates that over 2000 people stopped by the Earth Day event.

The second event which MEAC members were asked to participate in was the **Clear Bag Campaign** organized by City's Waste Management Sub-Committee. The aim of the Clear Bag Campaign Weekend (April 27-28) was to target some of the City's most prominent retail establishments who had agreed to participate in the GLAD clear bag sample/coupon campaign. This weekend was strategically selected as a final reminder that the City's move to clear garbage bag pick-up would be commencing the following week.

Clear Bag Weekend Campaign Locations

The following City of Markham retail locations agreed to participate:

Store Name	Address	Ward	Sample Bags Distributed	Comments
Longos	7355 Bayview Avenue, Thornhill	1	500	Many people said that they didn't live in Markham. People would really like to also use small clear bags so that they can continue their routine of lining garbage containers in the house with a bag.

Store Name	Address	Ward	Sample Bags Distributed	Comments
No Frills	8601 Warden Avenue	3	100+	Store reports event went smoothly and that customers are using the coupons
Loblaws	200 Bullock Dr	3	750	Ran short of Recycling Guides – in very high demand
The Village Grocer	4476 16th Ave	3	250+	Many did not recall receiving (Mission Green) Newsletters in the mail
No Frills	5762 Highway 7 E.	4	750	Store reports event went smoothly and that customers appreciated the information and handout materials
Garden Basket	9275 Markham Road	5	Not even one box was given away.	Garden Basket – very low traffic, table not placed in a good location. 2 volunteers at this location
Canadian Tire	2900 Major Mackenzie Dr East	6	750	Store reports event went smoothly and that customers are using the coupons for their clear bag purchases
Longos	3085 Highway #7	6	750	Store reports event went very smoothly and that customers appreciated the information and handout materials
No Frills	7075 Markham Road	7	500+	Shoppers complained that they could not find the bags in store - (No Frills / store manager was not happy either – due perhaps to a breakdown in communication at the retail level)
Sunny Food Mart	7700 Markham Road L3S 4S1	7	100+	Store reports event went very smoothly and was happy to participate
Sobeys	9580 McCowan Rd	4	750	Went through 3 boxes of bags in just under 2 hours
Longos	98 Copper Creek Dr (BoxGrove)	7	250	We went through the box of bags in just under 2 hours

Store Name	Address	Ward	Sample Bags Distributed	Comments
Canadian Tire	7650 Markham Rd	7	1 full box (250) given away,	Councillor Kanapathi also took 2 boxes (500) over to CanadianTire on 48/14
No Frills	9305 Markham Road	5	We had only 2 boxes of the Glad clear bag samples. We went through almost half of both boxes of the samples. ~ (250)	Very good traffic. We had some leftovers (no numbers). 3 volunteers at this location (Colin took one box with him for another location* along with the leftover leaflets). * "Cornell Community Centre – the busiest place. Great traffic"

Each retail location was staffed by City/MEAC/GLAD/Student volunteers

Each retail location was staffed by city members of Council, student and members of the community volunteers who were provided with 500 to 750 sample bags along with the City's clear bag program information.

In addition to the GLAD clear bag samples, the Waste Management office also provided the following information materials which were either handed out or placed on a table for shoppers to pick up:

- *Small Change Big Benefit:* (Blue Rationale Clear Bags Card)
- Yellow Yard Waste Stickers
- Source Separation Recycling Guide
- Battery Recycling Can Stickers
- Fridge Magnets (some locations)

After the Free Sample Bag, the City's source separation Recycling Guides were by far, the most sought after item.

From the feedback received, most were very appreciative of the reminder and sample of the disposal bag to be used. Many were very interested in learning more about "*what goes where*" and the Recycling Guide handouts were very popular as an educational/guidance tool.

The question of what to do with their existing dark (green/black) bags also came up quite frequently.

As a post Clear Bag Campaign weekend follow-up, we conducted a brief survey/poll of our volunteer group. The questions/results and comments are provided below:

MEAC Clear Bag Feedback Questions:

1. Most of the respondents were:

- a) Totally unaware of the transition / move to clear bags (7%)
- b) Receptive / appreciative of the reminder (85%)
- c) Annoyed with being told how they must change their waste disposal habits (8%)
- d) Just happy to get a freebie (33%) - *in addition to a, b & c*

2. Most frequently requested info materials

(other than freebie bag sample):

- a) Yellow Yard Waste Stickers (-)
- b) Recycling Guide (materials separator sheet) (65%)
- c) Hazwaste (Battery Can Disposal) Stickers (-)
- d) Blue *move to clear bag* rationale card (35%)

3. Most Frequently requested Question of the Day:

- a) What to do with black/green Garbage Bags? (59%)
- b) How many small bags can go into clear bag? (33%)
- c) What goes where? > (ref to Recycling Guide) (-)
- d) When does the program start? (8%)

4. Observations of exiting shoppers:

- a) Stopped to ask /clarify more waste disposal questions (45%)
- b) Had bought a box of clear bags in their shopping bags/carts (30%)
- c) Complained that they could not find the bags in store (25%)
- d) Requested another bag sample for family/friends/neighbors (25%) - *in addition to a, b & c*

5. Other Questions

- a) Does size (of clear bag) matter?... (10%)
- b) Will they really leave my black/green bagged garbage behind?... (40%)
- c) Where is closest Haz-Waste / e-Waste Drop off?... (-)
- d) Can I continue to use my existing Garbage Can?... (50%)

** denotes rate of responses from observation by volunteers*

Additional Comments:

- “There were a couple of them unaware of the program/ unaware of the start date/ wished they had more time “
- “There was expressed concern that kitchen garbage (mostly plastics, not organic) was collected in the kitchen in white, usually GLAD, bags and that the 4 bag limit may be too restrictive. They asked: “What am I supposed to do, empty the white bags into the clear bags? I don’t want to do that!” Many also questioned if this change affected the organic and recyclable materials waste collection.”
- “Although most shoppers were receptive of the program, a few did indicate some annoyance. Most of the few annoyed people expressed that they were already being good citizens, separating their wastes and setting them out properly for composting, recycling, disposal of hazardous waste and regular wastes. They seemed annoyed that “big brother” was telling them what to do and making them change, because a few irresponsible citizens may not be managing their wastes properly”.
- “A steady stream of shoppers, but not overly busy. Most reaction was positive, although there were a few complainers. Phil did a great job talking to the complainers and answering the tough recycling questions! It was nice to meet Councillor Logan – he was very friendly and knew a lot of people. I think it really helped having him there. The volunteer Logan lined up was very good as well. We went through the box of bags in just under 2 hours. And it was sunny and Longo’s was playing nice music”.
- “Many people said that they didn’t live in Markham. People would really like to also use small clear bags so that they can continue their routine of lining garbage containers in the house with bag”.
- “Many did not recall receiving (Mission Green) Newsletters in the mail”.
- + Pictures are posted on the EcoWatch Canada facebook page:
<http://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10151473640079635.1073741825.26623749634&type=1>

The actual/direct results of MEAC’s involvement in the two public awareness events may be somewhat difficult to quantify since our targeted community interaction was for only a short period of time, at selected locations, over just a few days. In addition, the City’s advertising efforts in numerous, repetitive print / online media, and road signage reminders may have had a greater, far reaching effect on public /community practice, which is beyond the scope of this report.

However, the results of our collective efforts will most certainly become visible *curbside* on upcoming waste collection days. And, having spoken with the waste collection team in my own neighbourhood, the preliminary results appear to be quite positive. Both the driver and the collector reported seeing “a lot” of clear bags put out this week.

While a few households appear to be still using the dark (black/green) bags, many seem to have already made the switch, as exemplified by the sample photos which follow;



Conclusion

The “*small change big benefit*” movement appears to be catching on. Whether through the City’s educational efforts, an increased level of environmental consciousness, or neighbourhood peer pressure, the move to clear is definitely here.

One final observation regarding the *enlightenment of the non-compliant* – the City might want to consider integrating both blue/green bin and waste collection pick-up teams with the tag team approach to the “educational” component due to the fact that the “garbage” is not always picked up *before* the recyclables (ie. If the homeowner takes in their empty blue/green bins *before* the waste collector can affix a reminder / “recycling star” sticker to the bin – the waste collector probably won’t have time to cheerfully hang a door hanger reminder since they seem to be on such a tight pick-up schedule). *Who knows? - perhaps the Blue/Green Teams already have their reminder stickers in hand to help out their solid waste collection colleagues...*

From: "Heath, Jack" <jheath@markham.ca>
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Cc: Karl Lyew <klyew@rogers.com>; Mayor's Office Staff & Councillors' Assistants <Mayor'sOfficeStaff&Councillors'Assistants@markham.ca>
Sent: Friday, May 24, 2013 5:01:33 PM
Subject: The next step for the clear bag programme

Clear bags are a huge success. Thank you.

We launched April 30th, with MEAC's help, and have now finished two collection cycles. Every resident has had a minimum of 4 weeks to start their own clear bag programme at home. Bags can be found in almost all stores.

We are above 85% and climbing. Over 60,000 households are participating. Complaints about participating are down to almost zero. It took one month for Markham to become the biggest in Canada.

We are getting calls from municipalities across the region and province. How did we do it? Many reasons, Council support is primary, but another has to be the "recycling star" on people's green bins. It is the biggest hit of all time for Markham community-wide programmes. Everyone is talking about them: "I got one," or "What did we do wrong?" or "Did you see that the people at the end of the street using green / black / opaque bags? They didn't get a star."

Next is compliance. In order to achieve higher than 72% diversion from landfill, by increasing blue box and green bin tonnage, the clear bag portion has to reach 100%. The same as in Nova Scotia, PEI, Guelph, etc. where clear bags are already in use; they only pick up garbage in clear bags. Garbage in green / black / opaque bags is left at the curb.

We are getting complaints though. Our staff are hearing many concerns about us picking up garbage in green / black / opaque bags put out by neighbours on the complainant's street. They ask, "Isn't Markham's picking up green / black / opaque contrary to the clear bag programme?" and "If our family is recycling better, why shouldn't the people three doors down, have to do the same?" It's social pressure and it's an important reason the green bin and every-2-week garbage were so successful 7 years ago. We knew it would happen again.

Starting with the third collection cycle, next Tuesday, we will pick up all garbage set out at the curb in green / black / opaque bags except 1 bag. One green / black / opaque bag will be left and stickered "Oops, your garbage should now be in clear bags (with a phone number to call for information)." The rest will be picked up. We will also continue to "recycling star" those who are doing it properly. Some will complain, but remember the new bylaw passed in January requires sorting into the three streams: blue box, green bin and garbage (which is now "clear"). Their left-behind garbage should have no "yucky" stuff in it anyway, no smell. Properly sorted "yucky" stuff should have been in their green bin which was picked up. Keeping the one bag and sorting dry stuff into a clear bag or the blue box for the next pickup shouldn't be too much of a problem.

It is becoming apparent which categories the bulk of non-participants fall into: (in no order) rentals, second suites, those who were not sorting properly in the first place, the BIAs, etc. [We are not worried about the BIAs; Claudia Marsales and staff will work with them to adjust.]

Compliance is one of the tougher aspects of introducing a new waste management system.

Markham has a lot of experience in waste management. Seven years ago, we handled compliance the same way when we moved to every-two-week garbage. Starting with the third cycle, the fifth week after launch, we took all the blue boxes and green bins but left non-compliant garbage at the curb. During the two earlier cycles, we came back and picked up garbage left at the curb in the wrong week. But in the fifth week, we left it with a sticker saying "Oops, this garbage will be picked up at the proper time next week." We got complaints but it obviously worked.

This time, starting the third cycle, next week, we will pick up all the blue boxes, green bins and clear bags. For any houses putting out green / black / opaque garbage bags, we will take all but one and leave a sticker on the one left behind. During the first 2 cycles this time, we picked up all non-compliant green / black / opaque garbage bags. But that is coming to an end. I would be surprised if anyone didn't expect this step. We have not decided when we will go to the next phase, 100% compliance, but probably will review progress after a few more two-week cycles.

The Mayor and Council's leadership has been exceptional; people across the province ask about it. I believe Council's role has been a major factor in Markham's remarkable progress as Canada's best waste management municipality.

Thank you again.

Please note: I have yet to set a date for the next Waste Diversion Sub-Committee – looks like June.

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Post Script...

On June 9, MEAC sent a representative (Kevin Boon) along with staff volunteers from the Sustainability Office to the Legacy Community Ratepayers Association (LCRA) annual Summer Festival which was held at Legacy Park (Ward 7). Ward Councillor Logan Kanapathi was also on hand as the City prepared a table setting out recycling and waste management information for local residents. Kevin reports, that in addition to answering the questions of those in attendance, the City's clear bag information and additional samples were very well received and that most had already committed themselves to the clear bag transition. The most useful materials received were the three streamed recycling guides and fridge magnets which help to provide households with a handy weekly visual reminder of "what goes where".

Acknowledgements:

MEAC would like to thank the following individuals for their leadership, guidance, input and support of this project:

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Mylene Bezerra

Ward & Regional Councillors,

MEAC /public volunteers ,

Waste Management Department staff

and the Glad Bag promotional team