

Composting in the municipality of Pontiac

Mo Laidlaw

In 2017, 230 residents responded to a survey on home composting vs. door-to-door pickup. While most preferred home composting, those in densely populated areas were more open to collection. (When rotating home-composters were offered to residents in 2008, only 16 took up the offer.) In February 2018 a majority of Pontiac councillors voted to implement door-to-door pick-up of compost by 1 June 2019, because home composting cannot deal with meat, diapers and pet wastes, and few people compost in the winter.

On the 17th September 2018, Pontiac, Chelsea and Cantley launched “Ensemble on collecte,” a composting program. The announcement produced a flurry of comments on social media suggesting that Mayor Joanne Labadie had single-handedly made the decision for collection, not home composting. Other comments covered the pollution caused by collection trucks, lack of public consultation, cost of pick up and, “I already compost, can I opt out?” Some were in favour, such as Eric Vezina who wrote, “We are a family of 8 and I can say for sure that if we currently had a compost pickup we would barely have any garbage. How can this be negative?”

In fact the leader of the project is the MRC des Collines’s Director of Planning and the Environment, Patrick Laliberté, a waste management specialist. He will meet with Pontiac council to advise them before they make a decision. The mayor has also invited Kevin Brady, a resident and environmental expert who offered in April to assist the municipality, to meet with her and M. Laliberté. According to Brady, while door-to-door pick-up makes sense in urban environments, for rural municipalities, with low population density and a large agricultural base, other options make more sense. “While collection may have merit in some parts of the community, in others it doesn’t. Think about it – does sending a truck up a long road to any rural house that already composts make sense? Does demanding people who already compost help pay the cost of a collection system for those who don’t make sense?,” he said, noting that to have an informed discussion, objective and credible information are needed to make the best decision for the community and meet provincial targets. “We must step back from the collection option, get the costs and benefit data (environmental and economic), and then make a decision,” he added.

Composting saves money

Ms Labadie points out that the mayor and councillors have a financial responsibility to residents as well as to protect the environment. The fee for dumping garbage at Lachute (not including transport) is \$135 per ton, while that for organic material (compost) is \$80. About 40% of Pontiac’s current garbage is compostable according to measurements by the MRC (not an estimate). Diverting 20% of organic material from the garbage will save the municipality about \$20,000 a year (the target is to remove 60% of organic waste). Within 20 years the dump at Lachute will be full and transport costs will increase.

At the moment the costs and potential savings are being studied. In addition to reduced disposal fees for compost, there are provincial subsidies for reducing garbage, which are applied directly to the waste management budget, reducing municipal taxes. The MRC is planning to send compost to Val-des-Monts before it is then sent to Portage-du-Fort. Pontiac has suggested sending its compost direct to Portage, and also collecting from the Hollow Glen area of Chelsea.

The area of Pontiac north of Gatineau Park is collected by La Pêche which is not planning compost pickup.

Councillor Maxsom voted against the resolution in February, and Ms Labadie suggests that if 100% of residents in North Onslow (most of Ms Maxsom's ward) choose to opt out of pick-up, this could be looked into. 100% diversion of organic matter would be required. This would include meat waste, cat litter, dog wastes, soiled cardboard and diapers for example. Apparently no rural municipality has achieved better than 60% diversion with backyard composting.

For densely settled areas like the village of Quyon and the Luskville beaches, community composting has been suggested. However projections are that in 20 years, more than half the population of Quyon will be over 70 years old, making this impractical.

Ms Labadie says that questions about frequency of pick up and need for training courses are premature as these details need to be worked out. Pick up by “polluting truck” is better than leaving organic material in garbage, which produces methane, a far more active greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, and may depend on whether compost is picked up in a separate collection from garbage, one of the details to be decided. Composting, even with collection, saves money. She also reminds us that many residents opposed the blue bins for recycling when they were introduced. Now they divert several tons per week of waste from landfill.

Detailed projected costs of disposal (not including pickup or transport)

2017, total tonnage of “garbage”, 1613 tons, disposal cost \$217,755.

Redirect 322 tons to compost in Portage du Fort, disposal cost \$25,760, distance 45km.

1290 tons to landfill in Lachute, disposal cost \$174,204, distance 140 km.

Total garbage and compost disposal cost, \$199,264.

Potential savings \$18,581.