

Our New Blue Box Program: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Across Ontario, and as of March 1st in Waterloo Region, the contents of your new recycling bin are now the responsibility of companies that sell you packaged goods and paper products, not your municipality. Circular Materials, an organization representing producers that make single use packaging, is responsible for communications, scheduling, collections, sorting, and processing recyclables.

This change originated under the Provincial Liberals in 2016 and was seen by many as good news, since it can increase producer responsibility for the packaging waste they generate that has been ending up in landfill or recycled at the cost of municipalities and taxpayers. The Provincial Conservatives inherited this legislation and largely continued the transition.

One positive result of this change is that the list of items that can be recycled through the blue box has been expanded to include such things as coffee cups, deodorant containers, toothpaste tubes, ice cream tubs, and frozen juice containers. We also need to worry less about what type of material we put in our bin, as long as it's packaging and paper products.

Now for the bad news. Just because we can put all these materials in our blue bins doesn't mean that they will be recycled. For example, many soft plastics (like plastic bags) can contaminate other recyclable blue bin materials if mixed with them (tip: separate soft plastics into a single bag to prevent this mixing).

Worse news is that in July 2025, the province caved to pressure from producer companies and dialed back key elements of the new blue box program. One of these concessions now allows up to 15% of plastic packaging to be burned and still count towards recycling targets. Burning this kind of waste creates more pollution and emissions, negatively affecting health and contributing to climate change.

The Provincial government's new producer-run recycling system also excludes many sectors that were

previously eligible for recycling services. This includes places of worship, daycares, private long-term care and retirement homes, non-profit groups, municipal facilities, and businesses. Thankfully, our Region will be continuing service for designated downtown areas, but this will be at the expense of the taxpayer, not Circular Materials, which will cover only residential recycling and designated schools.

Another significant change is that the plan to collect and recycle “away from home” beverage containers used outside the home has been dropped. As a result, an estimated 2 billion plastic beverage containers each year, and even more aluminum cans will continue to end up in landfills, incinerators or the natural environment as litter. This move keeps Ontario in last place when it comes to management of beverage containers. Except for Manitoba, every other provincial jurisdiction in Canada enjoys an effective deposit return program.

Last July’s Provincial amendments to recycling legislation also weakened the rules by: delaying recovery targets for paper, metal, glass, rigid plastic, and beverage containers by five years; delaying the planned expansion for multi-residential and other buildings by five years; and removing the planned expansion for public space collection of recyclables. Under previous legislation, producers were already only responsible for less than half of the materials they put on the market, leaving the remainder to be added to shrinking landfill spaces. Less material recycled means more waste in our landfills.

If this makes you angry, consider calling or emailing your local Provincial Member of Parliament to speak up. Let them know that, as the province that introduced the Blue Box Program to Canada in 1981, you expect the current Ontario program to exceed the one that it’s replacing – not take us backwards.

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