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### **COMPOST GIVEAWAY**

**The Solid Waste Management Committee recommends the following:**

- 1. Recommendation 1 of the recommendations contained in the following report, March 7, 2005, from the Commissioner of Transportation and Works be received; and**
- 2. Recommendation 2 be adopted:**

#### **1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that:

1. The Region work with Halton Recycling 2003 Ltd. to host a compost giveaway day for local residents during May, 2005.
2. Consideration of the possible yard waste program changes or the purchase of compost by the Region for free distribution to the public or local municipalities for use in their parks operations be deferred to the 2006 budget cycle.

#### **2. PURPOSE**

The purpose of this report is to consider the appropriateness of the Region purchasing compost for free distribution to the public and/or for use by local municipalities in their parks operations.

#### **3. BACKGROUND**

On October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004, Regional Council approved Clause 2 of Report No. 10 of the Transportation and Works Committee which asked that staff “provide a report to the Solid Waste Management Committee regarding the Region of York providing composted material to the local municipalities free of charge for parks operations use and community special events”.

#### **4. ANALYSIS AND OPTIONS**

In the early 1990’s, the Region distributed compost free of charge to local residents. This practise was consistent with that of many municipalities throughout Ontario at the time. Distribution of compost by the Region was, however, discontinued more than a decade

ago due to safety concerns and in an effort to reduce operating costs. Compost produced from our yard waste was available for purchase by residents from our contractor who at the time was Miller Waste Systems. Miller Waste continues to sell compost to residents and businesses even though they are no longer under contract to the Region. Our current contract with Halton Recycling (2003) Ltd. (HRL) is similar to our previous contracts with Miller Waste in that there is no obligation to give compost back to the Region, the local municipalities or its residents for free.

#### **4.1 Regional Yard Waste Composting Contract**

The Region's contract with HRL is for a term of two years with an option to renew the contract in April 2006. Under the contract, finished compost produced from processing the Region's yard waste is retained for sale by the contractor and the processing fee charged to the Region is reduced commensurately. If the Region was to consider giving compost to the local municipalities or residents, it would have to be purchased by the Region at full market value under our current contract.

#### **4.2 Rational for Compost Giveaway Events**

Distribution of compost to residents either free of charge or for a nominal fee is a common practise in Ontario. Reasons for doing so vary. In the early 1990's, markets for municipal yard waste compost were limited and the public was uncomfortable with its use. Municipalities had large quantities of material to be discarded as it could not be sold commercially. Hosting compost giveaway days was a convenient way to eliminate stockpiles of finished product and encourage residents to try the material. It also created a positive linkage between residential participation in yard waste diversion programs and the reward of receiving the finished product free of charge.

As municipalities began to eliminate the practise of collecting yard waste in plastic bags, contamination levels in the finished product improved significantly and public acceptance of the product also improved. Similarly, as the horticultural value of compost began to be recognized by residents, landscapers and nurseries, the monetary value also increased. Municipalities now commonly sell their compost into wholesale, retail and specialty markets for between \$8/tonne to \$30/tonne. Some municipalities still produce poor quality composts and rely on compost distribution days to move their material. Others continue to host these events for more specific purposes. Waterloo Region, for example, hosts compost giveaway days twice a year. Over 3,000 tonnes of material is given away annually at an estimated cost of \$40,000 per year in lost revenue. The primary purpose of the events, however, is to encourage residents to come out to the Region's landfills and in doing so, hopefully change residents perception of modern landfill and waste management operations.

#### **4.3 Need for Local Events**

Local yard waste collection programs have, in many cases, been in place for more than a decade. The programs have matured and are relatively successful. Yard waste does, however, continue to be placed in the garbage by residents and landfilled to a limited extent. Current Michigan legislation prohibits disposal of yard waste except for small

amounts mixed in with normal garbage. Therefore, more efforts to encourage the public to participate in York Region are justifiable. It has been suggested that by hosting compost giveaway days, the public will be more inclined to participate in yard waste diversion activities as they will see the benefit of their efforts. Unfortunately, Regional staff are not aware of any research to support this belief.

There is also a growing belief amongst compost organizations and their members that giving away compost may, in fact, devalue the material in the eyes of the public. Local compost manufacturers such as Miller Waste Systems have also expressed concerns with the negative impact giveaway days would have on the profitability of their operations. Moreover, it is equally possible that greater improvements in diversion could be accomplished by increasing yard waste collection frequencies, providing convenient public drop off locations for yard waste or through improved distribution of backyard composters. Given the current budget pressures facing local municipalities and the Region, it is unlikely that all of these options can be implemented.

The Region has also recently banned the use of plastic bags for management of yard waste. Eliminating plastic from the compostable waste stream was in part intended to improve the quality of the end product. This change will, however, inconvenience some residents. Distribution of compost to residents could be one way of acknowledging the efforts and support of residents for the program change.

The Region has not budgeted to host compost giveaway days or to purchase materials for distribution by local municipalities in 2005. Regional staff have, however, had discussions with HRL and it has been agreed, in principle, that HRL will host a giveaway event for local residents in May 2005. The primary purpose of the event from HRL's perspective is to rebuild public trust with the local community after the serious odour problems they encountered since their start up. Regional staff would propose to support this worthwhile effort by promoting the event at minimal cost to the Region. It is recommended that any longer term program commitments be deferred until the public can be consulted to determine their preferred approach to improving yard waste diversion and to consider any cost impact as part of the 2006 budget process.

#### **4.4 Compost Use in Local Municipal Parks Operations**

It has also been suggested by some local municipalities that the Region should supply local municipal parks operations with compost. Municipalities have historically used compost in their parks operations for several reasons. In the early 1990's, use of compost in demonstration gardens and on municipal properties was encouraged to show residents that the material was safe to use and demonstrate the horticultural benefits of compost. Municipal parks operations have also over time realized the benefits of using compost on their properties including improved soil quality, weed control and beneficial species growth and reduced moisture loss. Numerous municipalities purchase compost and compost blended soils as a regular part of their parks operations.

As discussed above, the Region's contract with HRL does not include any arrangement to purchase compost at a discounted rate. If there were, it would simply be reflected in a higher processing cost. Therefore, the local municipalities should make their own budgetary allowances and arrangements to purchase and use compost from local vendors as it improves their operational effectiveness.

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The financial impact of purchasing and providing compost free of charge to local municipalities for public events and use in local parks operations would depend upon the amount of material requested by municipalities. Wholesale prices for compost currently average approximately \$10/tonne depending on quantity and quality. Assuming the local municipalities would require a minimum of 4,000 tonnes annually, the cost to the Region would be at least \$40,000 per year. Funds are not currently available in the 2005 operating budget of the Waste Management Branch to support this activity.

## **6. LOCAL MUNICIPAL IMPACT**

Local municipal staff believe distributing compost to residents is an important step towards encouraging residential participation in yard waste diversion programs. On several occasions, they have asked the Region to consider purchasing compost for subsequent distribution by local municipalities. The Region has not provided compost to residents or the local municipalities in the last ten years nor has it been a condition in any of the Region's composting contracts. In 2004, the Region and the local municipalities did subsidize the purchase of backyard composters by residents as processing yard waste at home results in the lowest possible cost to process yard waste.

If local municipalities wish to host compost giveaway days or use compost in their park operations it need not be contingent upon the involvement of the Region. It would, however, mean that they would incur the cost of purchasing the material and distributing it.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Free distribution of compost to residents can be used as an effective promotional tool to, amongst other things, promote yard waste diversion. The potential negative financial impact of these events on local nurseries and compost operations should be taken into consideration. Staff believe that there are other approaches to ensuring the success of our yard waste program and will be consulting with the public as part of the 2006 program and budget process. Funds are currently not available in the 2005 operating budget to support providing free compost to residents or the local municipalities.

The Senior Management Group has reviewed this report.