

# TheStar.com - News - Recycling firms line up for city's bin pickup

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CITY HALL BUREAU

Suresh Munshani and Chuck Burke are frustrated.

They'd happily recycle every plastic grocery bag they could get their hands on.

They've read complaints by Councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker that he'd like to reduce the number of bags going to landfill. But Munshani and Burke say they can't find a big enough supply of bags.

They're not alone.

Debra Fearn-Wright of Grace Canada Inc. would love to recycle more polystyrene – often referred to by its best-known brand name of Styrofoam.

But she has trouble getting a supply as well.

Municipalities are anxious to divert waste, and some companies want to get recyclable material – but it's not always easy for the two sides to get together.

Munshani runs Recycle MBA in Mississauga. He says he could send 5.9 million kilograms of plastic bags a month to a U.S. firm that makes sub-flooring of recycled plastic. But he can get only about 181,000 kilograms in a good month.

There are customers who want to make plastic wood in the U.S. Last week Chinese buyers were in his warehouse looking for bags. "We'd set up the whole logistics chain," says Munshani.

But he can't find enough bags to supply them all.

Munshani says some municipalities who outsource their garbage collection have signed exclusive deals with big waste management firms who collect high value material, like aluminum cans and easy-to-recycle clear plastic bottles – but don't make an effort to sort or recycle lower-value products like bags.

"It's the municipal people. They don't talk to us. They have cartels. You can't get in the cartels. We could be 10 times our size right now if we had the support of the municipal people."

Geoff Rathbone, Toronto's acting general manager of solid waste, has spoken to Burke, but says moving forward isn't simple.

The city is targeting 2008 to start accepting plastic bags in blue boxes, but needs to sort out details first, he says.

There are many types of bags – grocery bags, dry-cleaning bags, bread bags, plastic wrapping from toilet paper. The city has to figure out which to collect, which types have markets.

Munshani insists his buyers will take all the bags, if only he could get the supply. Rathbone says Munshani will have to line up with others who might also bid for the right to get the bags once the city starts collecting them.

Burke says bags aren't the only plastic products being dumped when there's a market. Five-gallon plastic pails used for bulk cooking oil, dishwashing liquid, dog food and the like are dumped by the tonne in Ontario when they could be recycled, he says.

Fearn-Wright is also starved for material.

Grace Canada mixes used polystyrene with gypsum, recycled newsprint and other materials to make insulation for structural steel beams. Steel can weaken and buckle in a matter of minutes in a fire; the insulation protects the steel from heat damage for several hours.

The Grace Canada plant in Ajax recycles about 454,000 kilograms a year; Fearn-Wright says she could handle another 1.4 million kilograms. In an urban area the size of Greater Toronto, she knows it's out there.

But she figures if municipalities publicized designated collection spots, many residents would willingly deliver foam to central depots where garbage is sorted. Firms like hers could park a trailer at the depots and pick them up when full, she says.

Rathbone says Toronto is working with the Canadian Polystyrene Recycling Council to find a home for the city's polystyrene once collection begins in 2008. The council's members make or use polystyrene products.

Fearn-Wright says her firm is already sourcing material with the council's help, but still can't get enough material to fill the demand.

While recyclers chafe at the bit, De Baeremaeker pleads for patience. The city's waste diversion battle is being fought on many front, he says. For the moment, top priority is being given to starting Green Bin collection and driving up recycling rates in highrise apartment buildings.

The big blue recycling carts due next year will give the city more room to focus on bags and foam. But De Baeremaeker also says that he doesn't see the city's primary job as one of providing material for recyclers.

He's still focused on the first of the 3Rs of the environmental movement – Reduce.

To that end, he'd like to sharply reduce the number of plastic grocery bags in circulation through a tax on bags, to make them a more expensive choice.

Although the plastics industry has cast doubt on the effectiveness of a bag tax, De Baeremaeker says research he's seen after a bag tax was imposed in Ireland showed dramatic results.

The Irish went through 328 bags per person each year pre-tax, he says, but 30 or fewer after the tax was imposed.

