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Garbage crisis looms

The landfills are filling up, and there aren't any easy solutions. In this continuing series, City Hall reporter Jake Rupert examines the main issues facing the city in 2008.

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As the City of Ottawa's landfills rapidly run out of space, 2008 will be a pivotal year for averting a trash-disposal crisis.

"It has to be a year of action and results," said Alta Vista Councillor Peter Hume, who chairs the environment committee. "We have to start doing, as opposed to talking. If we wait too long, there will be a crisis, but if we act now, we should be able cope."

The current situation is this:

The city is running out of landfill space. There's little recycling in the institutional and commercial sectors that produce the most garbage, while in the residential sector, after the organics recycling program starts in 2009, there are few remaining big gains to be made in waste diversion.

While there is no obvious alternative other than expanding existing landfills or creating new ones, there's zero political appetite for doing that. In fact, the city is actively resisting a move by a private firm to expand the Carp Road landfill.

Meanwhile, alternative waste disposal methods are expensive and years away from being real solutions.

It's a tough mix of realities, but something's got to be done.

In 2006, the city's public works department estimated the municipality had enough landfill space for 10 years. In late 2007, the estimate was dropped to as few as five years.

And that includes plans to send about 10 per cent of the city's residential waste to a landfill outside the municipality and recycle residential organic waste.

The news is grim, but there's reason for hope: the city is revamping its plan of attack against waste.

Officials are running better public information campaigns on the issues of recycling, reducing and reusing items, looking at several alternative technologies as long-term solutions, and expanding residential recycling programs. But most importantly, they are looking at bringing in several recycling programs for industrial and commercial sectors.

Mr. Hume and Mayor Larry O'Brien say this last initiative is key to avoiding a garbage crisis like the one Toronto found itself in a few years ago when it ran out of places to put garbage and ended up having to ship it to Michigan at tremendous cost to taxpayers.

They say with institutions and businesses creating 70 per cent of the total waste while diverting less than 20 per cent from landfills, the challenge will be to get these producers doing their part to conserve landfill space.

The city is currently looking at a number of ways to do this, including bringing in an organics program for restaurants, and encouraging more construction and demolition recycling. Mr. Hume said the municipality will have to be a leader on this issue and even make unpopular or risky decisions to fend off future troubles.

"The fact of the matter is it's getting harder and harder to get more landfill space and technology could help, but well into the future, so the challenge is doing more now," he said.

"Businesses, institutions and people need to know we are approaching a tipping point here in this city and that they all have a role to play. Everybody, and I mean everybody, needs to start thinking about what they are going to do with things before they purchase them, not after they get them home."

But the city alone can't make businesses recycle their trash. Mr. O'Brien said the most important commitment needed to ward off a crisis is one from the provincial government, which has jurisdiction over commercial and institutional waste.

While residential trash-disposal is paid for by property taxes, businesses and institutions do not benefit from it. Instead, they must hire private contractors to get rid of their garbage. The result is that few bother to sort their recyclable materials or pay contractors to haul recyclables separately.

By the end of the year, Mr. O'Brien hopes to reach a solid agreement with the province to encourage - or force - waste diversion in the industrial, commercial and institutional sectors.

The city is also studying commercial and industrial waste reduction programs around the world with an eye to convincing businesses to do their part, even if the province doesn't step in with laws and regulations.

"This year will be about coming to terms with the reality that we obviously have to address the commercial side of things due to the large quantities of waste that goes to landfills from these areas," Mr. O'Brien said.

The mayor said the city will be looking to waste management companies for ideas while it looks at alternative technologies for long-term solutions, such as the Plasco waste-to-energy company that entered into a partnership with the city three years ago.

Mr. O'Brien said the city won't be in a garbage crisis this year or even next year, but if progress isn't made on commercial diversion rates and alternative disposal methods aren't found, 2011 and 2012 could look pretty ugly.

He said another way to buy time and save landfill space would be to break with the city's long-standing policy of taking care of the municipality's garbage inside its borders when nearby landfill owners are willing to accept Ottawa's waste. Mr. O'Brien said it's not something he'd like to do, but there may be no choice.

In the meantime, he urges everyone to do what they can.

"It's never been more important than now to reduce, reuse and recycle as much as we can."

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