

A composting question: Should green bins allow doggie doo-doo?

Four-legged Londoners just might be in luck.

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After years of debate and a pandemic-driven delay to London's green bin program, city hall is finally charging ahead – weighing up the options to build a curbside compost program in the largest Ontario city without one.

One of the key questions left to answer about the future green bin system is whether pet poop – which makes up a whopping 10 per cent of London's trash – should be allowed in the compost.

“If you were to include pet waste, it just reduces the overall quality of the compost you can get. It's about quality versus quantity,” Oluwatomilola Ladele, a food waste and waste diversion researcher with Western University's HEAL Lab, said.

“Do you want to capture all organic waste and have average quality (compost) coming out, or do you want to be very selective and have a high quality (product) coming out?”

Less than half of Londoners who shared their thoughts on a future green bin program wanted to include pet waste, about 45 per cent. That's well below the 73 per cent of respondents who wanted to be able to throw household plants into the green bin, or the 63 per cent hoping to compost cooking oils and grease.

It's the major difference between a green bin program and simple backyard composting – more materials can be composted, and kept out of the landfill, when using green bins.

“There's sort of a base set of materials: Food waste and some non-recyclable paper items like paper towels and that sort of stuff, bones, coffee grounds, eggshells and any foods that have spoiled and are no longer edible,” said Paul van der Werf, an adjust assistant professor of geography at Western University.

Some cities allow pet waste, and Toronto and York Region even allow diapers in their green bins.

“Those two items are fraught with a little bit of difficulty, mostly because they contain other things that are not compostable and would have to be removed from the system,” van der Werf said.

London's suggested approach would require dog poop to be in certified compostable plastic bags – which are on the market – before it's thrown in the green bin.

Staff opted not to include diapers in the mix, because of the plastic and other non-organic materials that would have to be removed after the compost is collected.

City staff recommend seeking proposals from companies that can compost or break down Londoners' old food scraps and other organic waste, including those willing to process pet

The green bin program is expected to cost \$5 million a year, plus \$12 million to \$15 million in start-up costs.

When curbside compost is rolled out – it'll be collected weekly – garbage pickup will be rolled back to every other week, something that many Londoners raised as a concern.

“All the yuck factor, stink stuff, ends up going into the green bin, and that's collected weekly. What you're left with isn't really smelly,” said Ward 11 Coun. Stephen Turner, who sits on council's waste management working group.

Exploring the possibility of including dog and cat poop in the green bin system makes sense, Turner said, because that pet waste is a big contributor to greenhouse gases in a landfill.

But he acknowledges the challenges.

The average household has about four kilograms, nearly nine pounds, of organic waste every week, according to the staff report.

The public engagement to find out what people want to see in their green bin – everything from the size of the green bin to the materials that can be composted – is all contained in a city staff report that goes to this week's civic works committee.

Building a green bin system that meets Londoners' needs is important, because that's what will drive its use, Turner said. “In order for this to be successful, we need people to buy into it.”

And all the experts stress that green bins have to come alongside a hefty dose of education and emphasis on reducing food waste from the start, not just dumping it into a compost bin.

Turner encourages people to reduce what they buy, keep a close eye on packaging, and even make less food if leftovers are ending up in the trash or compost.

The key is combatting food illiteracy with education, Ladele added.

“This doesn't solve the problem of food waste, it just helps divert the waste from landfill. But we as human beings, as steward of the environment, have to do our best to reduce our food waste,” he said.

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