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How green is that bin? York Region residents have reason to wonder

The region is trucking organic waste all the way to Ottawa and London to be processed, having no anaerobic digester available locally.



CARLOS OSORIO / TORONTO STAR

A York Region green bin waits for pick-up in Richmond Hill, its contents most likely destined for a plant near Ottawa or London, Ont.

By: [Noor Javed](#) News reporter, Published on Tue Nov 18 2014

Every week residents of York Region diligently bring their organic green bin to the curb; the contents are dumped into trucks and then hauled hundreds of kilometres away to be processed.

It takes a little more than five hours for the weekly 21 truckloads of organic waste to arrive at the Lafleche plant in Moosecreek, just outside Ottawa. A further 32 trucks travel two hours to the Orgaworld plant near London, Ont. The cost of shipping the green bin contents is \$139 a tonne and \$126 a tonne respectively, according to the region.

Since the green bin program was launched in 2005, diverting garbage from ever-diminishing landfill space has become the ultimate goal of municipalities across Ontario. York Region reported its most recent waste-diversion rate was 57 per cent, one of the highest rates in the GTA. In a release in September, the region said its overall diversion rate was 87 per cent, a

statistic that includes garbage incinerated in an energy-to-waste plant — a category not recognized by the Ministry of Environment.

While the region admits trucking is not an ideal option, it is the only one that can adequately serve York's [inclusive green bin program](#), which, unlike most of the GTA, includes things like disposable diapers and pet waste. Hence, the only option the region will even consider is one that leaves the diversion rate untouched, say staff.

But diversion rates don't take into account the increased carbon footprint that comes with hauling garbage across the province. And the question is: once that is factored in, how green is York Region's green bin after all?

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“In a place like the GTA, it's unbelievable that organics for composting would have to be sent five hours away,” said Franz Hartmann, executive director of the Toronto Environmental Alliance. “That doesn't need to happen. They could have an organics composting facility, or another municipality could easily build more capacity if they really wanted to.”

York is not the only municipality that trucks its organics to be processed. Toronto sends some of its organics to the same plants in London and Moosecreek, while the bulk of the waste goes to a newly opened composting plant in Etobicoke. Another facility near Dufferin and Finch is being updated and is slated to open in 2018. All other municipalities have processing plants close by.

“We try to make sure that we keep all the waste we generate close to home,” said Rob Rivers, director of waste management services for Halton Region, which sends its organics to adjacent Hamilton. “We don't want to transport it to other municipalities if we don't have to,” he said. “We are trying to minimize our carbon footprint as well.”

But York's options are limited. Neighboring GTA municipalities admit they have no space to take York's organic waste. Nor do they have the technology to do so.

York, along with Toronto, has one of the most inclusive green bin programs in the GTA, allowing disposable diapers, pet waste and sanitary products to be thrown out every week with the organics. Dealing with that requires a process called anaerobic digestion, where microorganisms break down biodegradable material without using oxygen.

While the program increases resident participation and diversion numbers, it also restricts where the waste can be processed. Both Lafleche and Orgaworld have special permits from the Ministry of Environment that allow them to process this material.

“By accepting more into our organics program, we see an increase in resident participation,” said Barbara Moss, spokeswoman for York Region. “There is a greater benefit to capturing these materials and turning them into compost than having them go into the residual waste stream.”

But all the other municipalities choose to keep plastics separate. In part, because it makes the composting process simpler, and also guarantees a better compost product at the end.

“Our program, to be successful, has to be free of plastic material,” said Craig Bartlett, manager of waste operations for Durham Region. “We want to make sure the material we put into the system produces a quality material coming out of the system,” he said. The compost produced from organics waste is eventually used by the municipality and sold back to customers in Peel and Durham.

York says the cost of hauling the finished compost back is too much, and hence it is simply sold to end markets by the processing facilities.

Gloria Marsh, executive director of York Region Environmental Alliance, says more research is needed as to what organics processing alternatives are available to York.

“They need to do life-cycle analysis to see what is really better for the environment and what is better for the municipality,” said Marsh. “What has a lower carbon footprint, what is more cost effective — they are all important considerations,” she said.

“Trucking is not a good thing, but what option do they have?”

Marsh is the first to admit that building an organic composter next door is a hard sell. Back in 2006, a composting plant in Newmarket was shut down after a judge ruled the odours coming from it were a public nuisance, and that the company, Halton Ltd., had failed to do enough to remediate the problem.

Since then, York had been actively petitioning Dufferin County to consider a partnership to build an organics facility, but talks faltered earlier this year.

“Dufferin County was an excellent site for the facility, but due to some of the financial restraints ... it didn’t make sense for them anymore,” said Laura McDowell, director of environmental promotion and protection at York Region.

But building a local processing plant is still not out of the question over the next few years, McDowell says.

“We are closely watching Toronto, (which) just built an anaerobic digester,” she said. “We are watching the technology and determining that we have the ability at some point to build the infrastructure.”