



Binners' Project

Plastics Action Plan | Policy Consultation Paper Feedback

September 25, 2019

Overview

Recently, the Oceans Legacy Foundation reported that one million beverage containers go missing every day in BC. Many of these containers and their plastic caps are suspected to end up in our oceans.

Compounded with that, in 2017 the City of Vancouver recognized that every week, 2.6 million coffee cups are thrown away in Vancouver, in addition to unknown amounts of plastic and polystyrene foam cups. These cups (and their accompanying lids and sleeves) make up about a quarter of the litter on city streets, parks, and in other public spaces

Binners have proven they are ready and willing to participate in returning discarded refundables, along with coffee cups through Binners' Project's annual Coffee Cup Revolution. With additional incentive to do so, they will be able to increase their income as informal recyclable collectors while growing the return rates in British Columbia.

Binners' Project

Binners' Project is a group of waste-pickers aided by support staff dedicated to improving their economic opportunities, and reducing the stigma they face as informal recyclable collectors.

Binners' Project is a project on Tides Canada's shared platform, which supports on-the-ground efforts to create uncommon solutions for the common good. Tides Canada is a national Canadian charity dedicated to a healthy environment, social equity, and economic prosperity.

Binners are among one of the most marginalized groups in urban areas. Their livelihoods stem from refunds received from used containers collected from bins. Binners positively contribute to our environment by diverting a considerable amount of waste. Specifically, binners work on the streets to recover bottles and cans that would often be thrown into landfill streams.

What we do

At its core, Binners' Project aims to decrease stigma surrounding binning and work collaboratively to build new income-generating opportunities for binners. We do so by fostering face-to-face interactions between binners, residents, and the community at large. Binners and core staff all work closely to implement current pilot projects at the local level, while the overall mission of the project is to build a stronger social presence and voice for a marginalized community in Vancouver.



Characteristics of the Binner Community

Bidders have little organized, articulate presence in Vancouver and across British Columbia. This means that a population characterized by self-reliance and positive environmental service is often overlooked and harmed. For example, in 2005, the City of Vancouver recommended that local bins be locked for health and safety reasons, including preventing messy lanes and illegal dumping. This policy, which did not involve bidder consultation was a significant setback for bidders, restricting income opportunities and locking recyclable containers out of the recycling stream.

Bidders are a vulnerable population, with a range of features that lock in marginalization, poverty, housing insecurity, and political invisibility. Most are dealing with, or have previously dealt with, addictions, mental health issues, physical disabilities, abuse, and/or homelessness. These keep in place barriers to full social and economic inclusion.

Yet, bidders are an essential part of the fabric of a well-functioning city, and they have proven their resiliency despite their place in the city being constantly contested. The bidder community holds enormous potential, and building bidders' capacity can have a dramatic impact on building a just and sustainable society.

Expanding the Deposit-Refund System

Increasing the incentive to return bottles and cans could effectively double the revenue bidders receive from refundable containers.

Bidders have been collecting bottles and cans, cleaning up BC's streets, and preventing these recyclable materials from heading to the landfill for decades. As a result, bidders are a vital part in helping our province reach its 77% return rate for refundables.

Bidders are extremely familiar with street-based recycling and are experts in recovering recyclable items. They have shown their eagerness and readiness to be involved in increasing BC's recovery rates of beverage containers. Expanding the deposit-refund system will only increase their incentive to continue doing so.

In recent years, Encorp Pacific has noted a decrease in the return rate of refundables, which when compared with that of other provinces and regions may partially be explained by the low incentive to return. Increasing the refund for items, currently at 5 cents, will create a new incentive for bidders to return more items, many of which they often leave behind for favour of existing 10 cent containers.

Additionally, expanding the system to include milk product containers, as is done in many other provinces, would allow bidders to further their impact in recovering recyclable materials. Since its inception, members of Bidders' Project have been supportive of expanding the refund system to include milk product containers as this would increase their potential earnings as well.



Coffee Cups

Every year, thanks to sponsorship and community support, Binners' Project hosts the Coffee Cup Revolution where we invite binners across Vancouver to participate in a pop-up depot where they can return coffee cups for a 5 cent refund.

On October 18th, 2018 we held our fifth annual Coffee Cup Revolution. This year we collected a record number of 86,732 coffee cups from the streets of Vancouver in only 3 hours.

In 2018, Encorp Pacific reported that 77% of refundable cans and bottles were recycled. The Coffee Cup Revolution is our way of showing that the same is possible for coffee cups.

The current refund system can be replicated for other single-use materials using the infrastructure in place: the bottle depots already established across the province.

Not only would this reduce the amount of coffee cups in BC landfills, but it would make binning more accessible to low-income people and particularly those with health issues. Coffee cups are a lighter alternative to bottles and cans, allowing those with mobility issues to participate more fully in this sector.

Modernizing the system

The proposed change to modernize the refund/cash system to include non-cash options will be helpful for many. However as systems become further automated in the future, we urge the Province of BC to ensure that the cash system remains. This is to ensure the refund system does not create barriers for those already facing significant barriers, including not having access to bank accounts. Fully automating the system will unintentionally create a barrier for those that may rely on the small amount of income they receive from refundables.

Recommendations

Binners' Project strongly endorses the proposal to increase the deposit/refund rate to 10 cents for all refundable materials, including milk product containers which will not only increase the return and recycle rate for these items, but also increase low-barrier income opportunities for BC binners.

Binners' Project also urges the Province of British Columbia to consider a deposit-refund system on coffee cups similar to that for bottles and cans. British Columbians, including binners across the province, have proven the incentive of a refund on their recyclables does indeed result in a high return rate on bottles and cans.

Finally, Binners' Project strongly urges the Province of British Columbia to ensure cash refund options remain in place, alongside more automated systems, to prevent unintentional barriers from being created for those who rely on this small amount of income.