

City of Markham Textile Recycling Program

The City of Markham is located within the Region of York (Ontario), part of the Greater Toronto Area. Considered as one of the most diverse communities in Canada, Markham has a population of over 350,000 residents in over 100,000 households.

Markham's City Council is comprised of the elected positions of Mayor, four Regional Councillors, plus eight Ward Councillors, each representing one of the city's eight wards. The City of Markham employs approximately 1,000 regular full time staff across 20+ business units, and seasonally, is supported by 1,300 to 1,800 part time and temporary staff.

Markham has a long established proven track record of successfully delivering leading edge environmental initiatives and now has the highest residential waste diversion rate in Canada—at 81%. Markham has been recognized with numerous environmental awards among them:

- FCM Public Space Award of Merit in 2010
- Recycling Council of Ontario Waste Minimization Award (GOLD) in 2014
- Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) award for the Textile Recycling Program in 2017

Waste composition audits conducted in 2012 by York Region, in cooperation with the local municipalities, found that textiles account for up to 5 to 7 percent of waste destined for disposal. In the City of Markham, that represented approximately 4,500 tonnes of textile waste sent for disposal per year. Failure to address textile waste is a lost diversion opportunity and has resulted in inadequate consumer education, scant diversion data and little end-market accountability.

Another contributing factor of textile waste comes from a major retail shift over the past decade known as 'Fast Fashion', inexpensive, disposable clothing—being sold into the North American marketplace. Worldwide it is estimated that approximately 80 billion new items of clothing are produced every year and national data indicates that textiles are among the least commonly recycled household goods. Studies indicate that every Canadian consumer produces 66-88 pounds of textile waste per year, and that 85 percent of textiles are thrown away without being reused or recycled.

In 2014, Markham conducted focus groups to determine residents' level of interest in textile recycling. The results provided insight to how little residents knew about textile recycling. Key findings from the focus groups provided valuable information for designing Markham's textile diversion program, the foremost being that textile waste was largely disposed of by residents, and that residents were interested in education, information, and a program managed by the City.

For many reasons, local governments have taken a hands-off approach to textile recycling. Textiles are a poor fit for municipal blue box curbside collection programs due to excessive costs and contamination; leaving textile collection exclusively to charities and for-profit collection companies. As a result, indiscriminate and unregulated placement of "used clothing" donation containers on both private and public sector sites created a dominantly



negative public perception of the textile recycling industry and posed potential safety issues for users and operators. This urban problem has many Cities searching for ways to regulate if not ban these containers completely.

With the unwavering support and commitment of City of Markham Council and a matching grant of \$67,000 from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM), Markham launched its Textile Recycling Program in 2016. Markham-owned and branded SMART bins were in place at City facilities by the end of year.



Partnerships with The Salvation Army, Diabetes Canada and STEPS for Recovery, each with extensive experience in the collection and processing of textiles, allowed Markham to expand both collection capacity and the number of planned collection points across the City. Each organization has provided standardized, City-branded textile donation containers for placement at multiple civic facility locations, including Markham fire stations, community centers, and arenas. Select commercial developments, and over 60 multi-residential properties also host textile donation containers.

Markham's charitable partners, service, sort, resell and recycle all of the textile donations captured by the City's program and provide full data tracking (including material tonnage and composition studies) to monitor both capture and diversion rates. All of these services are offered at no cost to the City, and Markham's charitable partners do not pay for what they collect.



A comprehensive community outreach campaign was designed to raise residential awareness, increase participation and engage the public at-large. Program-specific resources included City's website, social media platforms and mobile signs, property tax inserts, postcards featuring donation bin locations, continuous local newspapers ads, Markham's quarterly publication and annual Recycling Collection Schedule which is mailed to each household. Outreach events and presentations were provided to multi-residential properties, ESL classes, elementary and high schools, Seniors Centers and community groups. Media interest was generated through press releases, program unveiling, official launch events and two textile recycling industry symposiums which were hosted in-part by City of Markham.



In April 2017, Markham becomes the first municipality in North America to support textile diversion by banning textile waste from curbside collection service. Complimenting Earth Day 2017, Markham hosted "Textile Day", a successful outreach event introducing the curbside textile ban. Many volunteers, staff and Councillors participated in a city-wide campaign promoting the Textile Recycling Program.

The City of Markham continues to remain committed as a global leader in developing and deploying innovative solutions to advance zero waste and circular economy solutions. With increased public awareness and participation in waste diversion, Markham's textile diversion program offers a game changer example of sustainable approaches to addressing human consumption and climate change activities.



Since the 2015 launch, over 120 textile donation bins had been distributed and approximately 9 million pounds of textiles have been diverted to reuse and recycling activities and away from landfill, saving residents thousands of dollars in avoided garbage collection costs and landfill disposal fees.

Markham's diversion initiative demonstrates that it is possible to balance social, environmental, and fiscal responsibility and meet the desires of citizens to recycle their textile waste. With political support, funding and responsible community partners, this viable, trusted solution that gives back to the community, can be easily replicated by both large and small municipalities. These environmental approaches increase citizen confidence levels in municipal public works initiatives and boosts civic pride.

