Follow up to Our Meeting on Litter

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If Toronto is serious about tackling its littering problem, it has to talk about the subject far more than is being done.

This is not just a solid waste management division problem or mandate. The magnitude of the problem should affect and govern the actions of all city divisions because each employee of the city and every politician and agency must take stock and share responsibility for litter education.

The City needs to take an inventory of all the publications that go out to citizens either in their mailbox as newsletters, brochures and circulars, or online as tweets and social media postings, and weave litter prevention messaging into each of those opportunities of contact with the people who live, work in and visit Toronto.

This includes everything from tourism brochures to registration pamphlets or forms, permits, employee codes of conduct and contracts, library events, especially LiveGreen and any communications that are particular to the solid waste management division such as the twice-yearly utility and solid wastebrochure enclosure.

I’ve included a few examples where I see there is space for a littering message but none currently appears. To me, that’s an oversight and a waste of resources. Every opportunity, every point of contact with the residents, ought to contain some mention that litter reduction is important and that fines do apply for people caught breaching this law. I’d like this to be kept in mind when the city rolls out its Voluntary Measures Program – a type of litter prevention program.

For some reason there is a reluctance to call litter “litter”. We need to put a name to it. We need to repeat it often and make this word, the unequivocal negative that it is: a bad habit that needs to be unlearned.

A standard rule of journalism and public speaking: you tell your audience what you’re going to tell them, then you actually tell them what you want to say, and then you tell them what you’ve told them. With respect to littering, employ this as the strategy to overcome the malaise of mindlessness among some community members that causes them not to care about litter, to choose not to do anything about it much less feel it is their responsibility and a matter of law.

It is estimated that about one-third of the population will engage in littering behaviour. However, 88% of them will take corrective action when requested.

I’ve given some examples to staff of these missed opportunities. One is the Toronto Fire Service’s ‘don’t flick butts’ campaign, that missed the mark and opportunity to tell people about littering fines and the fact that tossing a cigarette from a balcony is littering. It’s more than just a fire hazard. Littering is a crime unto itself. The City’s ad agencies should be made mindful of this. The fire department’s fireworks education campaign, again, use the word “litter” in there because fireworks cause litter and people should be obliged to and told to clean up if they must have these displays at all.

Facility permit holders: Sports fields can often be the site of litter left behind even though there are garbage and recycling bins available. Groups must be responsible. Why not introduce a litter permit fee that is refundable upon leaving the site clean according to a defined standard? Upon issuance of a permit, the message needs to clearly state that ‘no littering’ and ‘clean up’ are part of the contract.

Do the same with facility users. So many times I’ve seen inappropriate waste disposal management at the City’s own facilities and events, as well as significant cigarette butt littering around the sites (libraries included). All these sites should be pristine. Our community centres, tennis courts, arenas, dog parks, libraries need to send the message that we want a clean, tidy city and that people who do not share that goal stand the risk of being penalized.

I’d like to see the Green Ambassadors trained about litter, to learn how to best reduce littering behaviours, and have these individuals available at booths at such City events such as Councillors’ Environment Days. Some jurisdictions overseas employ Green Wardens dedicated to litter crimes. (UK)

Let’s look at roadside litter and the role of the city’s Transportation Division and the communications it may be producing for motorists and the TTC’s for pedestrians. One example is the Vision Zero snow clearing information card.

Is there a budget in Vision Zero to produce a similar keepsake on stopping littering behaviours?

TTC does seem to pay a good deal of attention to litter and litter advertising on its system. It has a regimen of staff doing routine cleanups so that the system always looks tidy. This way of thinking needs to be applied to other city departments and agencies. Policing, for example, can we have an educational blitz, as is done for seatbelts or drinking and driving? Can we utilize roadside cameras? Technology is available to automatically ticket people if litter flies out their car or truck windows. Could body cameras be used to identify acts of littering? Does Toronto Police produce public information stating littering as a crime?

The building division and the planners’ interact with developers and builders whose construction sector is notoriously famous for being untidy and disrespectful of waste laws. The City needs to communicate a mandatory bin law and explain standards to this sector.

The information about litter prevention can’t just be confined to the solid waste management division. What about Public Health, and the many interactions the health staff has had with the public over the past two years? How aggressive a job has been done to ensure that masks and stickers and other materials distributed by the City weren’t littered at the vaccine sites and elsewhere?

Another fact is that health policy was responsible for pushing cigarette smoking outdoors. This created an enormously increasing litter problem with butts.

The City has clout. Why is it not using that clout to force brands to do something meaningful for litter prevention? I’m not just talking about GLAD giving away garbage bags or Tim Hortons giving away free cups of coffee. I’m talking about funding education to make sure customers know they’re not supposed to litter.

Businesses should want to use every means at their disposal to communicate that message and take back their product litter and be innovative to excite the public about this goal. I’ve noted that television advertising for the fast food chains never has waste bins or litter bins in the imagery.

Given that littering is entirely unacceptable, people should be encouraged to talk to their families around the dinner table about this issue. Find out if their children/spouse/partner has littered that day, and if they have, make sure corrective action is taken. The City could encourage this type of dialogue.

Instead of generally sweeping littering under the rug and not talking about it, let’s be loud and bold and proclaim that we are taking back our city from people who want to throw garbage on the ground and that the corporations must play a prominent role.

So, there needs to be a “Litter Cabinet”, or a group under the auspices of the City that meets and takes this on as a task force to come up with recommendations and a program that is ongoing, sustainable, meaningful and resourced.

Any electronic billboards under the City’s control should have repeated messages about litter being unwelcome, that fines may apply, and a call to action (phone 311, report licence plates to activate police/bylaw enforcement.

There are too few of these messages. Engage the public. Have slogan contests with the incentive where they can see their slogan on an LED sign on the DVP or in the next City communications piece. Work with the province to get these messages onto those garish billboards that they’ve put along the 401 Highway, and piggyback on the now-designated annual day of action on litter every May across Ontario. Set up a Clean Challenge among cities.

These should be Public Service Announcements produced by the corporations. It shouldn’t all be on the taxpayers’ back.

Where are the champions in the City’s civil service and on the political spectrum who are going to be the squeaky wheels and get some things done on litter prevention?

Littering has been known to cause:

- clogged drains/flooding;  
- environmental harm;  
- An addition to the plastic pollution crisis;  
- Denigrating and valuing areas of the city;  
- attracting crime and unwelcomed activity because they look neglected  
- psychological impact   
- more littering

Has the City ever held a public consultation exclusively about litter? Gwinnett County in Georgia had a good example of one recently with its live-streamed virtual “Conversation About Litter” on Facebook. It brought together community volunteers, experts and the general public.

More ideas: What about an informed managerial training session on the subject to ensure staff don’t sidestep their responsibilities?

Have Councillors’ Environment Days and City events ever considered having a litter education booth or ‘do not litter’ signs to give away?

Has a downloadable leaflet been prepared that residents can use to acquaint their neighbours and businesses about the best practices as well as intolerable ones concerning litter?

As a pilot, could colourful decal footprints go onto targeted sidewalks leading to waste bins to entice people to take those ten steps?

It is the lack of grasping the opportunities that has allowed Toronto’s litter problem to grow despite current efforts.

Cleanups alone are not the answer. We need to get to the root causes of this behaviour to start remedying it. A task force would identify what possible things can be done on a holistic basis involving every division, every agency of the City, especially the school boards. Not just a once-a-year or biannual cleanup day.

Litter prevention took a huge hit during COVID-19. There was a rapid and unparalleled accumulation due to PPE, takeout and cleanups cancelled due to crowding concerns. So much attention to the important issue of vaccination pushed the important issue of litter to take a further backseat in the public discourse. The failure of City bylaws and environmental law to control the PPE explosion of litter, no pro-active measure to require dedicated PPE bins, led to a huge increase of this extremely noxious litter. COVID interfered with the scheduled printing of utility bill enclosures and 60,000 taxpayers didn’t receive the spring/summer insert where litter is mentioned, but the winter one instead. A promised “push” on litter in the summer months of 2021 was underwhelming.

I received a report from south Scarborough where a woman was told by her councillor’s assistant that residents weren’t allowed to pick up litter on their own during the province-wide lockdown. She also complained that a seasonal city worker refused a senior’s request to pick up a pop can littering the splash pad area she was minding. That young female staffer refused the task. She was afraid she’d get COVID if she touched the can, she told the senior, and she “was entitled to her beliefs” and besides it wasn’t her job. Picking up litter is every employee’s job on a City-owned work site. Why aren’t litter grabbers available so there’s no excuse for this task not being performed by any parks employee on site? Allowing litter to linger on supervised City sites is unacceptable, as is the sight of City employees littering. Have they ever been told this?

How easy does the City make it for citizens to contribute to litter solutions on their own? I believe there was to be a staff report on how to better support volunteers. Some cities have litter tool sheds available for community use. (Chicago). Some arrange for no-cost disposal. I’ve read of libraries lending out litter picking gear and arranging with City crews to dispose of detritus collected so no cost is borne by the litter picker. Some jurisdictions go out of their way to find out what they can do to facilitate the efforts of community members. (Netherlands)

Yet I encountered an off-putting lack of cooperation when I sought permission to pilot a Do Not Litter sign in my local park as part of a supervised community experiment. I was told the sign did not conform to the City’s corporate communication design guidelines. The perfunctory response was anything but encouraging. There was no offer or interest in assisting, not even the provision of a copy of the corporate communications design standards that govern how signs must look to receive the City’s cooperation, just a ‘no’.

Councillors have given away free Slow Down signs that don’t appear to have met any design guideline scrutiny and their placement on City boulevards technically contravenes the sign bylaw. My program is an adopt-a-sign model, where signs are legally placed with permission and are minded so that litter doesn’t accumulate around them.

I would like the City to assist people like me who are innovative and committed to spotlighting the ideal of a lower rate of littering.

That Toronto spawned “Litterland”, my internationally read niche newsletter on litter, that found enough fresh news to publish weekly for 450 issues over nine years, is a fact in which I take special pride. I’d like my home city to recognize the value of the information in these newsletters and use it to respond smartly and strategically to our shared problem.

There are people in this city who want to contribute to solving this problem or at least lessening it. We see it’s getting worse and we see nobody’s talking about it.

Deliver education routinely. Why should one have to fight to get a monthly mention in Live Green, to see in there a repeated call to action requesting its readers to educate a friend, neighbour or family member? Among the materials in the accompanying appendix are brochures I’ve produced in the absence of finding anything comprehensive on the topic.

Does the City have a recognition program for anti-litter champions, a nice letter from the mayor, perhaps? I can envision something similar to the Key to the City for people who make meaningful contributions to a clean city, for example to a Toronto coffee shop that eliminates single use cups altogether, a retailer who collects cigarette butts for recycling, or a company with a demonstrable litter prevention framework.

Recognition counts for a lot. People will do more. Dissuasion, such as telling a citizen a ‘do not litter’ sign can’t be erected because the lettering isn’t the correct font, is the exact opposite of motivational.

Besides considering the content of the preceding overview, specifically, I have these requests of staff:

a) Facilitate permission for installing a “Please Care. Do Not Litter” sign in my local park and parkette. Private homeowners using the signs believe they do make a difference. Ideally, the City would identify locations for these signs.

b) Hold a dedicated session about litter similar to other City consultations that are routinely organized.

c) Deliver a communication piece dedicated to reducing littering behaviours in tandem with existing citywide mailings.

Thank you very much for your time. I am always available to talk about litter, share my research and participate in initiatives that address reducing littering behaviours. Thank you also for the work you do in a portfolio that I believe is massively underfunded as well as undervalued.

Sincerely,

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