

To: Regional and Corporate Services Committee
From:Carolynn Lane, Environmental Services Coordinator

Date: 2023-04-13
File No: 5365-23-001

Subject: Reusable Food Packaging Pilot Project

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Fraser Valley Regional District Board authorize staff to proceed with a one-year pilot project in Chilliwack to introduce and evaluate the potential uptake of a reusable take-out food container program in the region, in partnership with Reusables and the City of Chilliwack.

BACKGROUND

Restaurant patron dining habits are changing. Alternatives to dining-in by picking up the food to go or by using popular food delivery services such as Uber Eats and Skip the Dishes have become increasingly prevalent since 2020. This trend is resulting in significant increases in the volume of disposable containers in the waste stream. Cups, trays, clamshells and lids are used once and then thrown away. While many food businesses have opted for “compostable” or “biodegradable” packaging, these types of containers are often problematic as they can be challenging to break down in local composting facilities and may not be accepted. Other containers may be labelled as recyclable, but there is uncertainty about how much actually gets recycled as most take-out food containers end up in a landfill. Plus, **‘reduce’ and ‘reuse’ are both preferred options over ‘recycling’** as per the waste hierarchy (Rethink Reduce Reuse Recycle Recover Residual Management). Disposable packaging is also a significant business expense.

Reusables¹ is a Vancouver-based enterprise offering a zero-waste container-sharing platform for restaurants and food businesses. They are the only reusable packaging service in the lower mainland that does not use plastic containers. **Reusables operates by using a “lending library” system for durable stainless steel containers.** Businesses pay \$75/month to participate in the program and customers can participate by signing up for a \$5 monthly membership. Through participation in such a program, businesses can highlight their commitment to sustainability and customers can help by producing less municipal solid waste. The program utilizes the following general procedures:

1. Food businesses sign up to the program and are provided with stainless steel containers and cups.
2. When ordering at participating restaurants/businesses, customers can request to have their food put in the reusable container for pickup or delivery.

¹ Reusables Website: <https://reusables.com/>

3. The customer has 14 days to return the containers to any of the businesses participating in the local program.
4. The containers are tracked to ensure that all participating businesses have sufficient inventory. All participating locations have access to dishwashing facilities to sanitize containers.

Currently, Reusables operates primarily in Metro Vancouver and on Vancouver Island, and are looking to expand to a wider network, potentially including the Fraser Valley.

DISCUSSION

Staff of the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) and the City of Chilliwack have been involved in preliminary discussions with Reusables to determine the feasibility of establishing a program in the Fraser Valley. Based on their experience elsewhere, Reusables suggested a phased, or piloted, **approach to test the market and to start at a relatively small, local scale.** Given Chilliwack's existing single-use item reduction bylaw and their education efforts to reduce plastic packaging, it was viewed as a convenient and opportunistic starting site.

The proposed pilot area will be within the City of Chilliwack, for a one-year duration, and with up to 25 food businesses potentially participating in the first year.

With pilot project funding from the FVRD and the City of Chilliwack, Reusables and the Chilliwack Business Improvement Association will work together to onboard 25 food businesses and create an inventory of reusable containers to fit each **restaurant's take-out** container needs. Reusables will educate participating businesses and will help get the program off the ground. FVRD and City of Chilliwack will assist in communicating the program to the public. Once off the ground, the container-sharing program will be fully managed by Reusables and participating businesses. At the end of the pilot project, the FVRD and the City of Chilliwack will be provided with waste diversion data resulting from the project, as well as associated carbon dioxide emission reductions.

It is hoped that this pilot project will help to cause the use of reusable containers to become more mainstream within the region and to allow such programs to expand and to become self-sustaining.

COST

The FVRD has been asked to contribute \$10,000 towards the cost of this pilot study, which has been budgeted for under **the FVRD's Solid Waste Management Plan implementation budget for 2023.** The City of Chilliwack has also been asked to provide matching funds. Costs go to cover the purchase of the tech-enabled containers and return bins, program start-up and business recruiting, training for participating businesses, quarterly reporting from Reusables as well as waste diversion and carbon emission reductions.

CONCLUSION

With ever-increasing options for fast food, takeout and quick delivery options, to-go containers are becoming a huge waste issue. This proposed initiative for a reusable container program to be offered

within the region aligns with the **goals outlined in the FVRD's Solid Waste Management Plan for Zero Waste** and would contribute to a more circular economy. Reuse remains one of the best ways to prevent waste heading to the landfill, and switching from current disposable options to a container-sharing program may take some time to become normalized but is certainly possible. This project is proposed as a one-year pilot to help establish the concept and better understand the market barriers, with the potential to continue and expand if demand is identified and the program can function as a self-funded initiative.

COMMENTS BY:

Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services: Reviewed and supported.

Kelly Lownsbrough, Director of Corporate Services/CFO: Reviewed and supported.

Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer: Reviewed and supported.