

February 27, 2025

Committee of the Whole - March 4, 2025

Agenda Item 12.1: Single Use Items Strategy Phase 2 Reusable Containers, 2025-84

Subject: Considerations for Implementing the Reusable Takeout Container Program

Dear City of Guelph Council Members,

I am writing regarding Agenda Item 12.1: Single Use Items Strategy Phase 2 Reusable Containers, 2025-84, which will be discussed at the Committee of the Whole Meeting on March 4, 2025. As a business owner deeply committed to sustainability, I commend the City's proactive approach to reducing single-use waste. However, I believe it is crucial to share some practical challenges and considerations to ensure the successful implementation of this program.

Experience with Reusable Containers

At our restaurants, we have embraced sustainable practices, including using reusable containers in 3 of our 5 locations. The decision not to implement them in the other two is due to a variety of reasons, including logistical constraints, space limitations, and the complexity of effectively managing the system. While the system has its benefits, it also presents significant challenges, including storage requirements and sanitation concerns.

To operate efficiently, the system requires dedicated storage space, ideally outdoors, as food waste left inside containers poses risks of fruit flies, mice, and other pests. Complicating matters further, guests frequently mistake the deposit bins for garbage, exacerbating contamination and sanitation issues. These challenges are particularly problematic for establishments with limited outdoor space, making implementation impractical in certain locations.

Reusable containers also require a deposit, which some guests choose not to pay. This added cost has deterred many people from ordering, leading to less than 10% adoption. Despite our hope for higher rates, usage was notably higher during lockdowns. However, as financial pressures on consumers have increased, adoption has steadily declined.

That being said, we still believe in the potential of reusable containers and will continue to offer them. We see their value in reducing waste and enhancing sustainability practices. However, there are still a few more kinks we need to work out to make the system more efficient and user-friendly. Our hope is to adopt them in all of our restaurants once these challenges are addressed and the logistics are more manageable.

Operational Challenges and Financial Impact

The low adoption rate makes it difficult to justify the extensive programming required on our POS and third-party systems to effectively implement the deposit system. Given the low uptake, the cost and effort required for these changes have been a key factor in our decision not to expand the system.

Currently, we do not accept guest containers for food unless guests pack their own takeout, which avoids cross-contamination concerns. However, if mandated to accept guest containers, we would face significant safety issues. We have team members with severe allergies to peanuts, shellfish, and even strawberries. To ensure their safety, we would need to use latex gloves each time a guest's container is handled, leading to a significant increase in single-use protective gear, which ironically contributes to more waste and increased operational costs.

We do, however, accept reusable cups as they pose significantly less risk of cross-contamination. In cases of potential concern, we can use a measuring device to transfer the beverage without direct contact, allowing us to maintain hygiene and safety standards while still supporting reusable practices.

Logistical Realities and Guest Experience

Imagine the logistical nightmare of waiting for a guest to show up with their container so we can pack their food. This would disrupt workflow and raise serious concerns about food quality, health and safety, and container sizes – and let's face it, not all Tupperware is created equal! In an era where a single misplaced lid or spill could lead to a one-star review or even liability concerns, we'd be setting ourselves up for a disaster.

The cost implications are significant. With many restaurants already teetering on the edge of financial viability, this could be the final nail in the coffin. Rising costs affect every aspect of the industry, and implementing this program would only add to the burden. Increased use (and cost) of disposables, sanitizer, higher labour costs, and service bottlenecks would compound the problem.

And what's the alternative? Should we set aside space in the restaurant for guests to pack their own food if we don't handle their containers? Picture other guests watching someone try to shove french fries into a container that's too small – not exactly the ambiance we're aiming for. Would we need to designate seating for this chaos? The loss of revenue from occupied tables and the potential impact on the guest experience would be significant.

Or, if we do handle the containers, imagine the chef trying to figure out what goes where while orders pile up. This is inefficiency at its worst – chaotic, stressful, and a nightmare for portion control. This isn't just inconvenient; it's a logistical disaster waiting to happen.

Current Context and Broader Implications

With looming tariffs, continual rising costs, and ongoing economic pressures, people are already financially strained. Implementing this program would further increase the cost of food, which is not what our community needs right now.

This raises a fundamental question: Would the City's time be better spent working on affordable housing or policing restaurants to ensure they have a reusable takeout program? Which initiative will have a greater benefit on the overall wellbeing of its citizens? Mandating a reusable takeout policy is not the solution. Instead, I urge the City to allow people to vote with their dollar – to support the businesses they believe are doing the right thing and to choose what they can afford.

If times were different, my perspective might change. However, given the current economic climate, my concern is not just for my business but for all restaurants in Guelph that would be impacted by this mandate. I am advocating for the sustainability of our community's businesses and ensuring that we don't unintentionally cause further financial harm.

We are proud to be recognized as sustainability leaders, having received the Green Leadership Award for Canada in Foodservice and being the longest-standing restaurant group certified as a B Corporation in the world. We provide biodegradable containers, are carbon neutral, offer health benefits, provide interest-free microloans to our staff, and support local by spending over 80% of our dollars on Ontario products, not to mention the dozens of local non-profits, charities, and community organizations we support.

However, it is important to recognize that any additional operational costs will force us to look at other areas to reduce expenses, potentially impacting the programs and benefits we currently provide. Our commitment to sustainability remains strong, but any initiative must balance environmental responsibility with economic viability to be truly successful.

This burden cannot be placed solely on restaurants to absorb. Support and assistance are required from municipal, provincial, and even federal stakeholders to ensure a successful and equitable transition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While I support the idea of reducing single-use waste, I strongly urge caution in how this program is phased in. A gradual, measured approach would allow businesses to adapt more effectively without compromising their viability. This is not the time for sweeping mandates. Instead, the City should focus on allowing people to vote with their dollar and support the businesses they believe are doing the right thing.

We have an opportunity to do this right and set an example for other municipalities on how to implement a reusable takeout container program successfully. However, with the current framework, this risks becoming a case study in how not to do it. Let's work on being coaches, not referees, guiding businesses towards sustainable practices without penalizing them.

I am more than willing to participate in a pilot project to explore and identify effective solutions before any city-wide implementation. However, it is essential to at least trial a pilot to assess the viability of this program. Without a proper pilot phase, there is a significant risk of masking a problem with a bandaid solution, potentially leading to unintended consequences. It is crucial to determine whether this initiative effectively addresses the root issue or if resources would be better spent on alternative solutions that more effectively achieve environmental goals.

If we're going to do this, let's do it right – together.

Thank you for considering these practical realities and challenges. I am eager to contribute to a sustainable future and am open to further discussions to help shape a successful initiative.

Sincerely,



Court Desautels
CEO & Group Leader
Neighbourhood Group of Companies