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Waste diversion makes for a greener, cleaner Ontario

'Eco fees' are a small price to pay for a less toxic environment

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Green incentives help to deter the practice of putting out hazardous materials with our trash.

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Whether you buy detergent, fertilize your lawn, or just open the newspaper these days, so-called “eco fees” are likely to get your attention.

Looking beyond the consumer angst, the very real question of how to safely and affordably manage hazardous materials found in a myriad of household chemicals, cleaners, corrosives and batteries that we use every day.

At best, these materials generate high waste management costs that are buried in our property tax bills. At worst, they creep into our water, air and soil; or even into our bodies.

In 2007 an environmental group tested the blood of four federal politicians — then environment minister Rona Ambrose, NDP Leader Jack Layton, health minister Tony Clement and Liberal environment

critic John Godfrey. On average, each had 53 toxins in their blood, including 54 carcinogens, 37 hormone disrupters, 16 respiratory toxins, 54 reproductive or developmental toxins and 33 neurotoxins.

So if you are wondering why we need to dispose of your flashlight carefully, there is a good chance the answer is already in your blood.

It makes perfect sense to divert as much hazardous waste from landfills as we can. Everything from prescription medications to corrosive chemicals has the potential to cause significant harm to human and environmental health.

But if that isn't an incentive for you, we can always fall back on the astronomical savings.

Thanks to a massive oil spill, residents in the Gulf of Mexico are waking up to realities that Ontario municipalities have known for years.

First, it costs far less to prevent pollution than it does to clean it up (if you even can).

Second, governments are usually left holding the bill.

And third, cleanup costs are usually measured in millions of tax dollars.

That's why municipalities are such huge fans of waste diversion and the safe disposal of hazardous materials.

It's not cheap, but it's much, much cheaper (and healthier) for taxpayers if we prevent pollution in the first place.

That's why municipalities have quietly and conveniently handled these materials behind the scenes for years and added the cost to your property tax bill.

People rarely see that cost, of course. Out of sight is out of mind in a waste management regime that prefers the convenience of putting hazardous waste in garbage bags and sending them off to a landfill.

The system isn't innovative or inexpensive, but it's ours.

Not too surprisingly, other jurisdictions do much better, particularly in Europe.

They wisely lifted the responsibility and cost of waste management from the shoulders of property taxpayers and shifted it over to the industries that make hazardous wastes in the first place.

Under this system, industry is accountable for the things they produce and they have clear incentives to innovate, create less toxic products and use better packaging.

Consumers are better informed and better able to make decisions about what they want to bring into their homes and send to their local landfill. Those who want to save a few cents by avoiding products with disposal fees do just that.

As a result, smarter, greener products become more competitive products.

To their credit, Ontario businesses, manufacturers and retailers have begun to take on more responsibility for their products.

Through [Stewardship Ontario](#), a non-profit, industry-funded body, producers of hazardous household materials have been using disposal fees to fund waste-diversion programs.

The move actually began two years ago with nine categories of materials that included items such as solvents and paint. It is worth noting that this first phase was introduced without a hitch.

Confusion began on July 1, when 13 new material categories were targeted for waste diversion. The new list includes many more products that people use every day — from pharmaceuticals to aerosols. This fact, combined with the misleading use of terms such as “eco tax” and “eco fee” by some retailers, resulted in public confusion and an outcry from critics.

Not 1 cent of these disposal fees goes to government coffers. It is the retailer or producer who decides whether to pass on these costs to consumers as a separate fee. Some do. Some don't. Consumers can respond accordingly, if they wish, provided that retail pricing is as transparent as it should be.

Stewardship Ontario's program is currently diverting more than 20,000 tonnes of hazardous waste annually from Ontario landfills, according to the Ministry of the Environment. That is expected to increase to over 54,000 tonnes with the new product categories that came into effect on July 1.

For its part, Stewardship Ontario only charges producers what it costs to recover, recycle or safely dispose of these hazardous products. They collect fees from manufacturers based on the amount of product they manufacture and sell in a year. For example, they collect 12 cents for every 1,000 prescription pills manufactured and 23 cents per litre of insect repellent.

In the face of these facts, cost concerns are literally penny-wise and pound-foolish. It makes more sense to manage these costs openly where they start than it does to bury them in property taxes. And it makes more sense to create green incentives than it does to bury hazardous materials in our trash for now, and deal with more costly consequences later.

Shining a bright light on disposal costs and shifting them away from property taxpayers is a practical way to promote greater producer responsibility and greener consumer choices.