

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

From the shock of 'eco fees' comes eco consciousness

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In a couple of ways, my environmental consciousness has been raised several notches of late, entirely by accident.

In the first and happiest instance, upon the advice of one of the new cadre of experts (fireplace guy, architect, contractor, with more to come) I have assembled for my forthcoming stint in renovation hell, I had an energy auditor inspect my aged house.

The idea was to discover what would improve the energy efficiency of the skinny up-and-down Victorian dame, and thus perhaps qualify me for government rebates.

The inspector said that probably the single best improvement I could make would be to properly insulate the attic, which was leaking heat and/or drawing in cold air at entirely the wrong times of year. It was a daunting prospect (I had more visible improvements in mind), and while I nodded politely throughout, I confess I had no intention of following through.

However, I was planning to install a simple bath on the third floor, and in the process of starting that, the contractor had to tear down the plaster-and-lathe walls, and low, acoustic-tiled ceiling to replace with waterproof board.

Joe the Magnificent (this man works harder, and more neatly, than anyone I have ever known) called me upstairs early that first day, and though at first I could hardly see for the black dust, let alone take in what I was seeing, what was revealed was an absolutely soaring, 16-foot cathedral ceiling.

Hidden in my house, on the formerly stuffy and long-neglected third floor, was a veritable Muskoka-style cottage: I have an aerie in the making.

Suddenly, the inspector's advice seems brilliant, and once the space is insulated to the max, Joe et al will construct the aerie, and I will relocate my quarters to that floor once the gut of the ground floor is under way.

This is actually quite useful, as it will entirely ensure I remain deeply in debt, which is my natural state.

Plus, once they start on the kitchen, my godson John, who now lives in the basement where other young relatives have camped out before him, and I will be tragically forced to eat out virtually every meal, which we do as a matter of course anyway, but sometimes feel badly about.

Despite the bliss engendered by the discovery of the aerie, I managed to spend much of the week in a state of righteous indignation, as word spread about "eco fees" variously described in

the news as a new hidden tax or tax grab and engineered by a mysterious “government body” or “government agency” called Stewardship Ontario.

New tax! Shock and horror! Damn government! Fight the power!

I went on the Stewardship website, but found my eyes glazing over, the corporate-speak therein utterly defeating me. So I phoned and spoke to an actual person, one Amanda Harper Sevonty, who is the marketing director.

And guess what?

Stewardship Ontario is not a government agency of any description, though it was created by provincial legislation (the Waste Diversion Act, 2002).

Rather, it’s a non-profit Industry Funding Organization, or IFO, one of four established by that legislation to set up and operate waste diversion programs in the province.

As the name suggests, the money for Stewardship Ontario comes from the industry players (that is, the stewards) who manufacture the products which heretofore have ended up in landfill sites. Not a penny of taxpayer dough goes to run Stewardship Ontario; not a penny of eco fees goes back to government to squander.

The reason for the hullabaloo is that as of July 1, the very day the wretched and much-disliked harmonized sales tax also took effect in Ontario, 22 new material categories, with thousands of new products, were added to the list governed by waste diversion regulations.

These are household products – such as paints, antifreeze, corrosives, irritants, fluorescent bulbs, petroleum derivatives, windshield washers, camping fuels, etc., etc. – which require special handling to be made environmentally safe or friendly.

For instance, Stewardship Ontario charges manufacturers 13 cents for every kilogram of corrosive materials they put into the marketplace, or 76 cents for every kilo of non-rechargeable batteries found in TV remotes.

The miracle to my simple mind is how many of these hazardous-to-the-environment products can be reprocessed and reused or at the least neutralized and rendered benign for a landfill.

Though the first manufacturer charges on nine categories of materials were introduced two years ago to little fanfare, it was this second phase – incorporating as it does so many more products that people use every day – which caused the outcry. As manufacturers passed on their increased costs to their retailers, some absorbed the costs, and some began charging the “eco fees” that showed up on cash-register receipts.

Stewardship Ontario is involved only in charging stewards fees for what it costs to recover, recycle or render safe these hazardous products; it’s the retailers who decide how or if they will recover the additional cost with a consumer eco fee.

So, no new tax; no money flowing back to government to spend; no vast new bureaucracy springing up to burden the taxpayer (Stewardship Ontario was, until about a year ago, a virtual organization, and now has all of 20 staff), and really, a pretty smart program that is the first of its kind in Canada.

It's all part of what in Europe is called extended producer responsibility; the citizen's end is to participate in what's called the Orange Drop program, and take their hazardous products to recycling depots and not toss them in the garbage – and ultimately, the landfill.

I am off now to the aerie-in-progress, to ponder further on all this.
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