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GARBAGE POLICE

'Big Brother' trash collection system divides communities

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KELOWNA, B.C.— From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

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Come the new year, garbage trucks armed with cameras and scanners will be patrolling the streets of Kelowna, taking note of households that don't properly sort their recyclables from their trash.

And while miscreant residents won't face fines, they can expect a visit from the garbage police, who will offer friendly guidance on separating paper and plastic.

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Garbage man Andrew Shepherd watches a camera as he operates a hydraulic lift system as he picks up garbage in a Lake Country subdivision near Kelowna. | Daniel Hayduk/ The Globe and Mail

But residents of the neighbouring municipality of West Kelowna have been spared a similar fate after their city council refused to go along with a system that conjures up images of Big Brother.

Kelowna and West Kelowna are on opposite sides of Okanagan Lake, but both participate in an automated curbside garbage and recycling program managed by the Regional District of Central Okanagan. About a year and a half ago, households in the program received new carts that are lifted and emptied by a mechanical arm on the collection trucks.

The carts have electronic tags, and the trucks are outfitted with scanners and cameras that can be used to track cart use and record

evidence of bad recycling behaviour.



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At the time, however, the regional district did not buy the computers and software necessary to implement a monitoring system, so last month it asked the municipalities to come up with approximately \$1.70 per household to do so.

The program's manager, Peter Rotheisler, promised the investment would more than pay for itself, with less garbage going to the landfill and less contamination of recyclables.

But while Kelowna's city council enthusiastically embraced the request, West Kelowna's council firmly rejected it.

West Kelowna councillor Carol Zanon called the monitoring system "a draconian invasion of privacy."

A retired lawyer, Ms. Zanon said in an interview that residents have a right "to a quiet enjoyment of life" without governments poking through their garbage.

She worried about the possibility that medical conditions could be revealed when people put old prescription bottles in the trash.

And if evidence of possible illegal activity is discovered, "is it reasonable grounds for the police to contemplate charges?" she asked.

Such concerns, while understandable, are overblown, Mr. Rotheisler said.

The on-board cameras' image resolution "isn't high enough to look at detailed information," he said.

He added that the pictures will be good enough only to distinguish between different types of material: "That's a piece of cardboard versus a piece of plastic, or yard waste versus food waste."

The information will be mainly used for "targeted education," he said. Households that do not properly sort their recyclables will be visited for one-on-one instruction. For now, they won't face any other penalties, although Mr. Rotheisler said fines of up to \$100 may be implemented in the future.

The data could also be used to design a "user-pay" system, in which households would be charged on the basis of how frequently their carts are tipped, rather than paying a flat fee with their property taxes.

West Kelowna Mayor Doug Findlater is uncomfortable with the idea. He said people are already dumping garbage in the community's many wooded areas.

"If you put more barriers in the way of using the system, including a price barrier, then you're going to wind up paying for it other ways in terms of cleaning it up from the bush," he said.

The B.C. Civil Liberties Association's policy director, Micheal Vonn, said her concern with the regional district's plan is its potential for "function creep."

The system is fine as long as it's used only to ensure proper recycling behaviour and not for other purposes, she said.

"All kinds of people want information, and so where it is gathered, there is always the question of how we're going to be able to maintain those restraints," she said.

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