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## An Explanation of the Decade-Long Delay in the Rollout of a Green Bin Program in London Ontario, Analyzed Through the Lens of the Multiple Streams Framework

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Ontario, Analyzed Through the Lens of the Multiple Streams Framework

Subject keywords: Environment, Infrastructure, Policymaking, Service delivery

Geographical keywords: London

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# An Explanation of the Decade-Long Delay in the Rollout of a Green Bin Program in London Ontario, Analyzed Through the Lens of the Multiple Streams Framework

## Abstract

The Multiple Streams Theory, established by Kingdon in 1984, posits that laws are created when different sets of interests, called the problem, policy, and political streams, align. When that alignment of the three streams does not occur for a particular issue, legislation to address the issue is not created, regardless of the issue's importance. This paper will use document analysis to explain the example of the City of London's introduction of curbside collection of organic waste, also known as Green Bin programs. London's landfill has been predicted to reach capacity in 2024 since before 2016, the province of Ontario has been releasing new laws that make it harder and harder to reach goals without a curbside compost program for a decade, and the City of London has been slowly becoming an outlier as more and more Ontario municipalities gain Green Bin programs. London ran a pilot Green Bin project in 2011 and 2012. Only in 2024, thirteen years after the pilot's start, did curbside collection of organic waste finally begin. This study asks why there was such a long delay, using the Multiple Streams Framework to explain. The study found the long delay was due to a lack of urgency, which cause the problem stream to not line up with the policy and political streams in motivating change. London's Green Bin program rollout is an example of a phenomenon explain by the Multiple Streams Framework, wherein important policies are not created until the problem, policy, and political streams do not line up.

Subject keywords: Environment, Infrastructure, Policymaking, Service delivery  
Geographical keywords: London

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## Introduction

The Multiple Streams Theory, established by Kingdon in 1984, breaks away from traditional political theories. Instead of a rational process creating laws, it posits that laws are created when a storm of various interests and actors align in just the right way (Beland and Howlett 2016). When that does not happen, important programs can be delayed for years. The City of London's introduction of curbside collection of organic waste, also known as the Green Bin programs, is a good example. The City of London is paying 80 million dollars to expand the local landfill, because by the end of 2024 it will have reached capacity (Get Involved London 2023). Curbside collection of organic waste reduces the amount of waste that goes to landfill. The city has known for over a decade that the landfill would reach capacity around 2024. Yet, the curbside collection of organic waste only began in January of 2024. Starting this program years earlier could have delayed the expensive expansion of the landfill. Instead, the City of London has instituted a Green Bin program just fast enough to not be penalized by the provincial legislation requiring Ontario municipalities of a certain size to have Green Bin programs by 2025 (Government of Ontario 2018). Separating and composting organic waste also helped London get the provincial permission needed to expand the landfill. Ontario is reluctant to allow landfill expansions and requires municipalities to show that they are doing everything they can to divert waste, first. London could have started the Green Bin program much earlier. The pilot began in 2011. It is normal for municipalities with curbside collection of organic waste to move from the pilot program to full implementation within a few years. In London, it took 13 years. This is because the landfill situation was not urgent yet, and so the issue to not

rise to the agenda in the problem stream. London ran a pilot Green Bin project in 2011 and 2012. Only in 2014, thirteen years after the pilot's start, did curbside collection of organic waste finally begin. London's Green Bin program rollout is an example of a phenomenon explain by the Multiple Streams Framework, wherein important policies are not created until the problem, policy, and political streams do not line up.

## Methods

In order to explain the root of the delay, this study relies on document review to perform a longitudinal study of a single case. Document review involved tracing paperwork back through time. The agenda, minutes, and presented reports of the city's Council and Committees are available online. Reports reference related documents on the first or last page. This method of research treats individual documents as units of analysis, including agendas, reports, city publications, and journalistic articles. This qualitative data links events through time.

## Background

### Timelines of Green Bin Programs From Pilot to Rollout in Other Municipalities

This thirteen-year gap is not typical. It can take a long time for a project to progress from the brainstorming stage to implementation in any level of government. However, once

the pilot program has occurred, green bin programs tend to be at least partly implemented within a few years. There is no aggregated data on the average time it takes to roll out a green bin program once the pilot has started, but there are many examples. Waterloo launched a 5000-home pilot in 2006 and 92 000 homes had joined by the end of 2009. The Region of Peel started a 1600-home pilot project in 2002 and served all 286 000 eligible homes by late 2006. The Region of Halton started out with 5000 homes in 2004 and took the project full-scale in 2008. Hamilton launched a 2300-home pilot in 2003 and finished extending service to all the single-family residences in the municipality in 2006. They even started phasing in organic collection from multi-residential buildings just two years later, in 2008. Even the tiny county of Dufferin, which had only 25 000 homes by the time green bin service was extended to the entire community, started its 2000-home pilot in 1999 and completed implementation in 2007 (Stauch 2012).

Timelines are similar even outside of Canada, in municipalities of a wide variety of sizes. Oslo, Norway, started their Green Bin service with 17 000 homes in October of 2009, and by June 2012 had expanded it to the entire municipality. San Francisco started their pilot in 1999 and finished rolling out the program to the whole city in 2003. Hernani, Spain, started door-to-door collection in 2009 and their landfilled waste halved in a year. Even tiny Usurbil, also in Spain, established door-to-door collection of organic waste for their 6 000 residents in just six weeks (Global Alliance 2012).

Ontario as a whole has moved towards Green Bin programs over time. As of 2016, there were 37 municipalities with Green Bin programs, and the number has grown higher

since. Until January of 2024, London was the largest municipality in Ontario that did not have a Green Bin program (Maloney 2016).

## London's Landfill Crisis

For over a decade, the W12A landfill where the City of London dumps all of its garbage has been predicted to reach capacity by the end of 2024. Expanding the landfill is expected to cost 80 million dollars. London cannot ask its immediate neighbours for permission to use their own landfills, because the surrounding counties are also running out of landfill space. Once upgraded, London's landfill will be used as the sole dumping spot for multiple counties (Get Involved London 2023).

## Environmental Pressures to Compost

Allowing organic matter to enter landfills can worsen the climate crisis. When organic matter decomposes in an environment without oxygen, such as the compressed environment at the bottom of a landfill, anaerobic bacteria break down the organic matter and release methane (Themelis 2007). Methane is a greenhouse gas which, over 20 years, is 86 times as potent as carbon dioxide. In 2020, emissions from landfills caused 24% of methane emissions in Canada. Allowing organic matter to break down in a composting facility, where it can be regularly aerated, prevents the production of methane (Government of Canada 2023).

Landfills can also harm habitats and people by tainting groundwater with leachate. Leachate is the mixture that is formed when rainwater flows down through a landfill,



collecting soluble substances on the way down. Heavy metals and other toxic substances can be carried by this flow (Abdel-Shafy et al. 2024). Allowing organic matter into landfills increases the volume of leachate and adds biohazards to the list of the dangers that leachate poses.

## Timeline from the Green Bin Pilot to the First City-Wide Collection

### The Pilot

After two delays, London Ontario's Green Bin pilot began in 2011. For fifteen months, 760 homes in the Glen Cairn area had their organic waste collected once a week. The 50-60% participation rate was significantly high, and residents overall had a positive response to the program (The Canadian Press 2011). Based on the timelines of other Ontario municipalities, after the pilot ended in 2012, a whole-city curbside collection of organic waste should have been launched.

### Documents Declaring Delay

The idea of the Green Bin was not dropped immediately. After the pilot finished, through the rest of 2012 and most of 2013, city staff continued to work on the countless reports and steps needed to investigate the feasibility of a city-wide organic collection service. On December 23, 2013, city staff finished a document which would be presented for public comment. This document is titled Road Map 2.0: The Road to Increased

Resource Recovery and Zero Waste (Advisory Committee 2014). This document was built with influence from the document Road Map to Maximize Waste Diversion, which had been created in 2007. Road Map 2.0 was made available for public comment from January of 2014 through April of 2014. Members of the public could give feedback on many issues, including reduced container size for garbage, expansion of the north end EnviroDepot, and whether to delay green bins, among other things. On July 21, 2014, the Civic Works Committee discussed the collected feedback. One of the decisions about which the public had been asked for feedback was whether or not the city should ‘delay Green Bin decision until new, emerging and next generation resource recovery review is complete.’ 90% of the members of the public who commented on this statement said that they did not support delaying the Green Bins. Yet the recommendations to council, listed right beside the survey results, was to continue to delay implementation of the Green Bin. This was based on ‘technical reasons and public opinion survey presented in Road Map 2.0.’ This document of recommendations for council states that Green Bins should be delayed in part due to the feedback of a survey which stated that 90% of respondents did not want a delay (Stanford 2014).

During the same July 2014 meeting, the Civic Works Committee received the report Interim Waste Diversion Plan 2014-2015 and approved the actions within. This plan included changes to how the city ran recycling pickup, EnviroDepots, and related operations. The purpose of the plan was to cover the 18-month period until provincial regulations were expected to change (Stanford 2014). In 2013 and early 2014 the Ontario parliament discussed Bill 91, the Waste Reduction Act, 2013. It would have made changes

to provincial waste disposal laws and recycling laws, including how the processes were financed. Bill 91 was partway through the process of becoming a law when provincial parliament dissolved for a new election (Toronto Environmental Alliance 2014). Municipal authorities across the province suspected a similar version of the bill would be passed by the new parliament. In June of 2016 provincial parliament passed a very similar bill called bill 151, the Waste-Free Ontario Act (Orpin 2016).

London's councillors could not have predicted the exact contents or timing of the coming law, but they correctly estimated that, despite the dissolution of parliament, provincial regulations around waste disposal would soon change. This spurred them to create the Interim Waste Diversion Plan 2014-2015, which would cover the estimated period of time until a new law was passed and London would have to change rules to adapt.

The Interim Waste Diversion Plan 2014-2015 did not include introduction of the Green Bins or preparation to introduce them soon. Following the recommendations made to council after the City of London received feedback on Road Map 2.0, the plan delayed Green Bins. This was ostensibly to await a review of newer technologies which may be able to handle organic waste more efficiently.

In 2015 and 2016, another large plan involving waste disposal was developed. The London Plan, approved in 2016, was a 400-page document which covered a wide variety of issues, including waste disposal, public transit, community-building, and many others. It has since been updated (The London Plan 2024). The City Building section discusses waste disposal. In a keyword search, neither the City Building Section nor the Environmental

Policies section mention the phrase ‘green bin’ even once. The City Building Section occasionally discusses compost, but it is always in a vague context which includes home composting and never mentions curbside collection. The London Plan was written at the same time the City of London was writing its first multi-year budget. If City Council had wanted to include Green Bins in the London Plan, 2016-2019 Multi-Year Budget would have been a perfect opportunity to ensure there were enough funds devoted to the issue. They did not.

Another plan created in this timeframe was the 2015-2019 Strategic Plan. It mentions residential organics programs with vague language and does not once mention Green Bins or any other form of curbside organic waste collection (Council’s 2015-2019 Strategic Plan 2015).

## Getting Back on Track

Delayed though it was, progress towards the creation of a Green Bin program did not stop completely. In 2017, the City of London created the Waste Management Work Group (WMWG). This group of councillors was assembled to find ways to meet new provincial waste diversion targets. Legislation passed in 2016 required Ontario municipalities to work towards diverting at least 60% of their waste to sources other than landfill. The very first WMWG meeting involved presenting a report which analyzed waste diversion statistics collected from Ontario municipalities with and without curbside organic waste collection and concluded that a Green Bin program would be necessary to realistically reach a 60% waste diversion rate (Stanford 2017). In July 2018, the WMWG

received a decision report which included a table listing proposed actions to achieve 60% residential waste diversion. That table, and similar tables in documents to follow, included a curbside organics management program, specifically called it a Green Bin program, and proposed shifting garbage collection to a less-frequent bi-weekly schedule. The WMWG also prepared new cost estimates (Stanford 2018).

Throughout 2019, Council and Committees took steps towards implementing the Green Bin program. This included finalizing operational details, finalizing the budget, and requesting proposals for companies wishing to enter a contract to process Green Bin materials (Stanford 2019).

On March 2, 2020, City Council approved funding for the 60% Waste Diversion Action Plan, including the Green Bin program (Civic Works Committee 2023). On March 3, the City of London published the 2020-2023 Multi-Year Budget, which accounted for the introduction of a Green Bin program. Further actions were planned for 2020 and 2021, including awarding contracts for collection vehicles and for the bins themselves, running education and awareness programs, distributing the green bins, and finally, in fall of 2021, rolling out the green bin program (Stanford 2019).

The reader of this paper can likely guess at the source of interference, which the writers of the 60% Waste Diversion Action Plan could not have predicted: a global pandemic created crises, fundamentally changed society, and wreaked havoc on supply chains.

The Green Bins rollout was planned for 2021. The City of London announced it would be delayed until 2022. Later, the City announced the rollout would occur in 2023.

The rollout was even delayed within 2023. Finally, starting in fall of 2023, the Green Bins were distributed. Collection began in January of 2024.

## Theory: The Multiple Streams Framework

### Overview

The Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) was introduced by John Kingdon in 1984. Similar models had been discussed before then, including the 'garbage can model.' The MSF breaks away from the traditional frameworks' methods. Traditional frameworks tend to lay things out rationally. A problem leads to planning a solution which leads to implementing the solution which leads to evaluating how well the solution fixed the problem. Actors are rational and events happen in sequence. The Multiple Streams Framework is based off of a different idea. Through the lens of the MSF, policies are created only when something called a 'policy window' is opened. Policy windows open when three streams are all in alignment: the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream (Beland and Howlett 2016).

### The Problem Stream

The problem stream deals with the reason that an issue arrives on a government's agenda in the first place. Here, it would be a discussion of why a discussion about the landfill was on the London City Council's agenda to begin with. The basis of this stream is

the idea that situations do not sort themselves into ‘problems’ or ‘not problems’ on their own. Events occur and different people see them differently (Hoefer 2022). To convince a group of people to change a situation, a person must first convince them that the situation needs a change. Even if people agree that a situation is problematic, the reason *why* it’s a problem can be a source of disagreement. For example, some people may see rampant drug use as a criminal scourge, while others may see it as a public health crisis. These two ways of defining the problem lend themselves to very different solutions. The first suggests the use of police and/or modifications to existing punishments, while the second is conducive to creating addiction treatment centres. In addition to whether a situation is a problem and what that problem is, there is also the question of whether it is an issue severe enough to warrant attention and resources. Decisionmakers have limited time, attention, and energy. The municipalities that elect them have limited funds. Paying attention to one new problem often means another issue gets put on the backburner. An issue needs to be severe and/or urgent to warrant attention. Often, a rise to the agenda happens due to a disaster. For example, an advocacy group may try for years to convince a government to instate better safety measures for a local factory, with no success. However, if the factory has a chemical leak that makes people sick, the need for safety measures in the exact same factory can rocket up to the top of the agenda.

A ‘problem entrepreneur’ is a person or group who defines a problem in a particular way and tries to convince the government that a problem exists, that it exists in the way they view it, and that it is significant enough to merit their attention and other resources. The problem entrepreneur may or may not have a particular solution in mind (Hoeffler

2022). An advocacy group that deliberately draws attention to a factory being unsafe but may or may not be aware of what specific measures would make it safer, is a problem entrepreneur.

## The Policy Stream

The policy stream involves a free-floating miasma of solutions in search of problems. A 'policy entrepreneur' champions a specific solution that they believe would improve society if applied in any number of different situations. They often have an ideological focus. For example, a person who advocates for deregulation and free markets may suggest these ideas as the solution for everything from rising milk prices to deforestation. If the ideological focus is high, then the policy entrepreneur may consider actual data about the situation to be irrelevant, unless it supports their own view. Policy entrepreneurs can also be more reasonable, suggesting their solution applies to a small number of problems. Wherever they fall on that spectrum, policy entrepreneurs match their solution to an existing problem (Beland and Howlett 2016). For example, in the case described in this paper, a champion of curbside organic waste collection could have recommended it as a solution for climate change, compliance with Ontario law, allowing London to save face and not be 'behind' other Ontario municipalities, a want to reduce the stench of a landfill near their home, a need for more compost for farmers, or any number of other issues. The Green Bin program was successfully created in large part because London's landfill is nearly full, but if the landfill had plenty of space, people in favour of Green Bins would still exist and would posit it as a solution to a different problem.



Countless people and organizations want to increase composting for environmental reasons, but are happy to try using financial, legal, or other reasons to encourage governments and other organizations to compost.

## The Political Stream

The political stream is all about the elected officials in power and which actions are likely to increase their odds of winning the next election. This includes interest groups and difficult-to-define factors, like the national mood (in this case, the municipal mood). Politicians have countless issues to which they could potentially dedicate resources, and a very finite amount of municipal funds, time, and personal energy. Devoting any of those resources to one problem and solution requires passing up on an opportunity to affect a different problem and/or solution. Neglecting that different problem could anger their voters and prevent their re-election. As such, politicians need good reasons to pursue a particular problem and solution. The motivation required can be called ‘political will.’ It is a combination of politicians’ willingness to pursue a course of action, and the willingness of the people they represent. Fear of angering voters makes politicians unlikely to perform an action that is unpopular (Beland and Howlett 2016).

## Policy Windows

A policy window is the time period where all three of these streams are in alignment. The problem has been defined cohesively enough and important enough to gain a place on the agenda. Of the many solutions floating around, a person or group has successfully

attached one to the problem. The public and politicians are onboard, and there is political will to take action. When these policy windows open, it can be very briefly. Any person or group who cares strongly about the problem and/or the solution must act quickly before it closes (Beland and Howlett 2016).

## Putting the Theory to Work: How the Multiple Streams Framework Explains the Delay of London's Green Bin Program

### The Policy Stream

From the start, London had a policy entrepreneur championing the Green Bin program. Jay Stanford has worked in various positions in the City of London from 2005 through to the present day. Throughout nearly his entire career, he has advocated for Green Bins. In 2008 he became the Director of Environmental Programs & Solid Waste. He has stayed in similar roles throughout his career as a City of London employee. He is currently the Director of Climate Change, Environment and Waste Management (SunshinelistStats 2023). His name and statements show up in news articles dated from 2008 to today. As he told Global News in October of 2023, he has been dreaming of the day when the Green Bin program would begin for a very long time (Healy 2023).

## The Political Stream

Political entrepreneurs have been less consistent, as the City Council has turned over multiple times in the last 13 years. There have been multiple short-term political entrepreneurs, such as Stephen Turner, who tried to get Green Bins included in the 2016-2019 Multi-Year Budget beyond a tentative business case (Maloney 2016). The 'mood' of the public has waxed and waned towards Green Bins, with a general trend towards higher approval as years have gone on. Enthusiasm has shifted in different years, based in part on whether larger events, such as the 2008 stock market crash, were occupying public attention.

## The Problem Stream

The stream that has not been lined up for action until recently is the problem stream. Most people could agree that a full landfill is a problem, but whether or not it is a large enough problem to gain space on a crowded city agenda is another matter. The landfill will likely reach capacity by the end of 2024, and that information has been known for a long time. However, since a government always has many important matters competing for their attention, the landfill was not considered important enough to stay on the agenda long enough for the program to finish development and roll out, until it became an emergency. The Interim Waste Diversion Plan 2014-2015 and the 2016-2019 Multi-Year Budget both delayed the creation of a Green Bin program, despite London's own survey showing a 90% approval rating among the public for proceeding at the original speed. The creation of the Interim Waste Diversion Plan 2014-2015 started in 2013. The 2016-2019

Multi-Year Budget was written in 2015 and 2016. The landfill reaching capacity was an inevitable crisis, but a distant one. Likewise, the climate emergency and Ontario's looming legal changes that would require Green Bins did not feel urgent. Once Ontario passed a law requiring 60% waste diversion in 2016, and another requiring Green Bin programs in municipalities above a certain size in 2018, the process of creation gained momentum. The WMWG was created in early 2017, and the 2020-2023 budget included funds for the Green Bin program. It is possible the landfill could have risen onto the agenda even without urgency, but that would have required strong advocacy from a problem entrepreneur. No such person emerged.

## Conclusion

According to the Multiple Streams Framework, policies are made only during times when the policy window is open, when the problem, policy, and political streams all align. Between a landfill reaching capacity, pollution, and changing Ontario law, London Ontario had many reasons to start a Green Bin program shortly after their pilot, as most Ontario municipalities have done. The City of London instead waited until 2020, nine years after the start of the pilot, to attempt the rollout. Partly due to COVID-19, weekly Green Bin collection did not start until January of 2024. The reason it took so long to establish a Green Bin program that 2020 came and the pandemic interfered was because the problem stream was not in the right position for policies to be made. A full landfill is a problem, but it was not yet urgent enough to rise to the top of the agenda. As such the Green Bin

implementation was delayed. This cost the City of London money, because it necessitated the expensive expansion of the landfill before it otherwise would have been needed. This case demonstrates the importance of keeping track of the three streams. If we wait for problems to become eye-catching and/or urgent enough to pop up onto our radar, it can lead to unwise decisions that put off necessary choices and cost governments resources. If a situation is better dealt with now than later, a skilled problem entrepreneur may be able to get it onto the agenda. Dealing with problems *before* they become emergencies would be a welcome change.

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