



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

# Briefing Note

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**To:** Council

**File No.:** 5360-02

**From:** Director of Operational Services

**Date:** January 14, 2026

**Subject:** Solid Waste Contamination Management – 2026 Update

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**PURPOSE:** This briefing note provides Council with a snapshot of contamination rates across all three collection streams (garbage, recycling, and organics) for the City of Courtenay’s automated curbside solid waste collection system.

**BACKGROUND:**

At the October 15, 2025, Council Meeting, staff from Comox Strathcona Waste Management (CSWM) presented the Solid Waste Management Plan Renewal Update. The plan outlines long-term strategies for garbage and recycling, shaped by community input and technical evaluation. Several strategies focus on waste reduction and diversion, including supporting multi-family waste separation, reducing industrial and construction waste, and equalizing access to services.

A key area for improvement identified was the reduction of divertible materials in the garbage stream and minimizing contamination in the organics stream. Notably, contamination rates discussed in this report are based on grab samples, representing a snapshot in time, rather than a comprehensive system-wide or annual averages. These samples provide valuable insights but should not be construed as definitive indicators of overall system health.

The City of Courtenay utilizes an automated curbside collection system in which residents place all accepted organics (food and yard waste) together in a single, standardized bin for weekly pickup. This approach streamlines the collection process, increases convenience, and supports higher diversion rates.

In contrast, the Village of Cumberland and Campbell River have operated manual curbside organics programs. Residents supply their own containers, and collection crews pick up food and yard waste separately at the curb. Cumberland’s program is limited to food waste, and Campbell River’s was previously limited to yard waste before expanding to include food waste in a forthcoming automated system. These manual programs require more effort from residents and collection staff and may result in lower participation and diversion rates compared to automated, comingled systems.

Direct comparisons between municipalities should account for differences in program automation and scope. Courtenay and Comox are the most comparable, as both have automated systems collecting comingled organics.

It is also essential to note that, from the outset of automated collection, while contamination concerns have been discussed as a broader diversion strategy, reporting of waste composition out by the CSWM to City staff has been inconsistent. Public messaging to residents in the CSWM service area has been limited, and requests for specific details on which materials, such as products labelled as ‘compostable’ or ‘biodegradable’, were not consistently addressed. While the inconsistent messaging has been a challenge, the lack of contamination management technology on the collection trucks has limited the City’s ability to provide accurate and targeted feedback to residents. That said, messaging and communication to Courtenay

residents in the curbside collection program has been delivered by the City’s small and dedicated solid waste team. Moving forward, the CSWM has filled the communications staffing role, and both services are poised to work collaboratively in 2026 to provide more consistent and effective resident messaging.

**DISCUSSION:**

This section examines the current state of solid waste contamination and diversion in the City of Courtenay, focusing on recent findings from waste composition studies and operational data. The analysis highlights areas where targeted education and operational improvements can further enhance program outcomes, particularly in reducing contamination and maximizing diversion. Consideration is given to the unique features of Courtenay’s automated, comingled collection system, as well as the differing approaches in neighbouring municipalities, to provide context for interpreting performance metrics and identifying actionable opportunities.

**Diversion Potential from Garbage:** The 2025 waste composition study found that garbage samples from Courtenay contained 20% compostable organics, indicating room for improvement. For comparison, the Town of Comox is at 19%, Campbell River at 35%, and Cumberland at 24%. These rates reflect the proportion of organics present in the garbage stream, not contamination. The data is a valuable tool for designing future education programs.

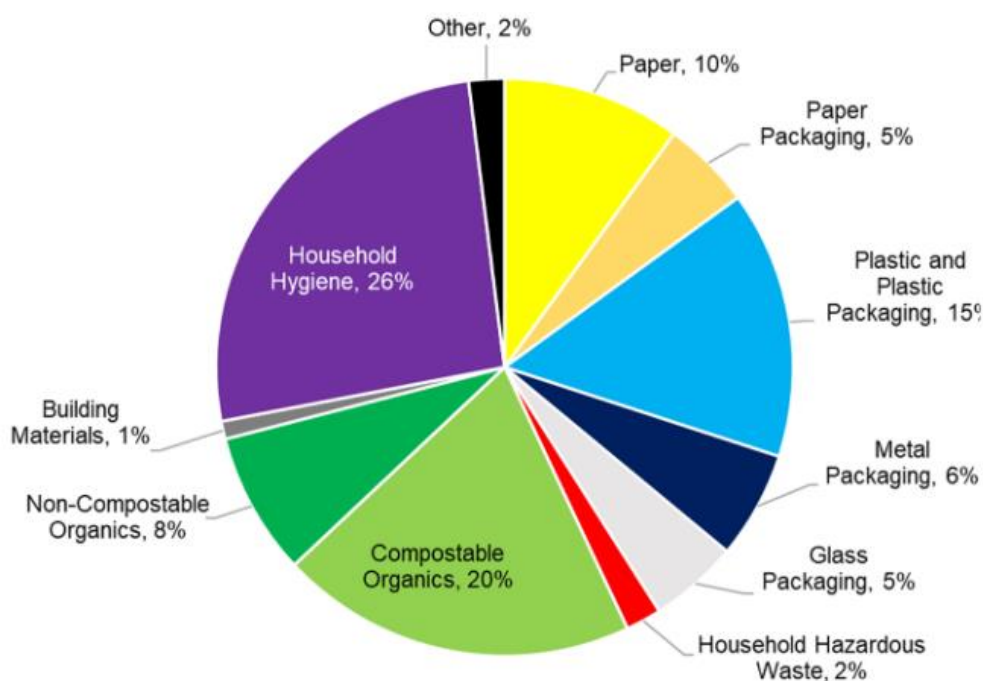


Figure 1. City of Courtenay 2025 Waste Composition Study results.

**Organics Contamination:** Courtenay’s organics stream contamination rate stands at 2.63%, compared to Comox at 2.2%, Campbell River at 0.19%, and Cumberland at 0.52%. However, these figures must be interpreted in light of program differences. Cumberland’s program is limited to non-commingled food waste and is not automated, while Campbell River’s program is a recent development. Thus, Courtenay and Comox provide the most direct comparison. Benchmarking against other BC municipalities with automated systems, contamination rates typically range from 2–5%. Courtenay’s performance is consistent with provincial norms and, in some cases, better than average. The primary issue in Courtenay is plastics entering the organics

stream, including items labelled ‘compostable’ or ‘biodegradable.’ Addressing this will require targeted education and practical alternatives for residents.

**Waste Diversion Achievements:** Courtenay’s residents have demonstrated exceptional commitment to waste diversion, achieving a 38% reduction in garbage and a 49% increase in organics tonnage in the first year of automated collection, leading all municipalities in the CSWM service area. The City’s organics-to-waste ratio (2.17) far exceeds regional averages, underscoring the effectiveness of local diversion efforts. While continued work is needed to address organic contamination, these achievements should not be understated.

Provincial waste reduction targets for 2035 have already been met by Courtenay’s curbside program, with the average household producing just 211 kg of garbage annually, compared to the regional average of 551 kg per person and the provincial target of 350 kg per person.

Table 1. 2024 CSWM Garbage and Organics tonnages and comparisons:

Municipality	2024										
	Food and Yard Organics				Garbage by Munis				Total Tonnes	Total Fees	Ratio O:W
	Tonnes	%YOY	Fees	% of waste	Tonnes	%YOY	Fees	% of waste			
Campbell River	3,149	30%	\$ 346,379	44%	4,034	-2%	\$ 625,270	56%	7,183	\$ 971,649	0.78
Courtenay	4,575	56%	\$ 503,203	68%	2,107	-36%	\$ 326,585	32%	6,682	\$ 829,788	2.17
Comox	2,820	37%	\$ 310,209	51%	2,739	-19%	\$ 424,545	49%	5,559	\$ 734,754	1.03
Cumberland	536	14%	\$ 58,955	57%	399	-7%	\$ 61,845	43%	935	\$ 120,800	1.34
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>11,080</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>\$ 1,218,745</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>9,279</b>	<b>-17%</b>	<b>\$ 1,438,245</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>20,359</b>	<b>\$ 2,656,990</b>	<b>1.19</b>

**Recycling Contamination:** Transitioning to automated curbside collection typically results in a temporary increase in recycling contamination. Recycle BC audits recycling more frequently, providing ‘Contamination Scorecards’ several times per year. Courtenay’s Not Accepted Material contamination rates have historically hovered around 5% and are currently trending downward. Loads exceeding 5% contamination may be rejected, resulting in service level failure credits and potential fines.

Educational efforts include mobile app campaigns, regular updates to the Waste Wizard recycling encyclopedia, and community outreach. The Courtenay Collects app has seen strong engagement, with over 13,000 monthly reminders and 5,700 addresses participating.

The figure below shows a summary of Courtenay’s performance in the Automated Cart – Single Stream category. That is, the City uses automated carts, and all recyclables are comingled as a single stream in those carts. Contamination is categorized by Recycle BC as either Incompatible or Not Accepted.

- Not Accepted material is anything that is not accepted for recycling by Recycle BC but may be handled by another Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) or donation program. It includes books, clothing, hazardous materials, scrap metal, as well as garbage or organics.
- Incompatible material is Not Accepted material plus Depot Recyclables (Glass, Foam, Flexible Plastics), as well as curbside recyclables that are nested (e.g., take-out cups inside a take-out bag) or recyclables that are normally recyclable but may contain food residues.

From Q1 to Q3 of 2024, both Incompatible and Not Accepted Materials rates increased to levels higher than previous years, as would be expected with the transition to automated collection. In fact, Recycle BC expects this and requires that municipalities provide a Transition Plan for automated collection before the start of a

new automated system to ensure there is a plan in place to reduce contamination through education and technology. By Q4 of 2024, the rates of both Incompatible and Not Accepted Materials began to reduce to acceptable levels. Historically, the City of Courtenay has kept the rate of Not Accepted Materials around 5% and currently is trending downwards below this rate.

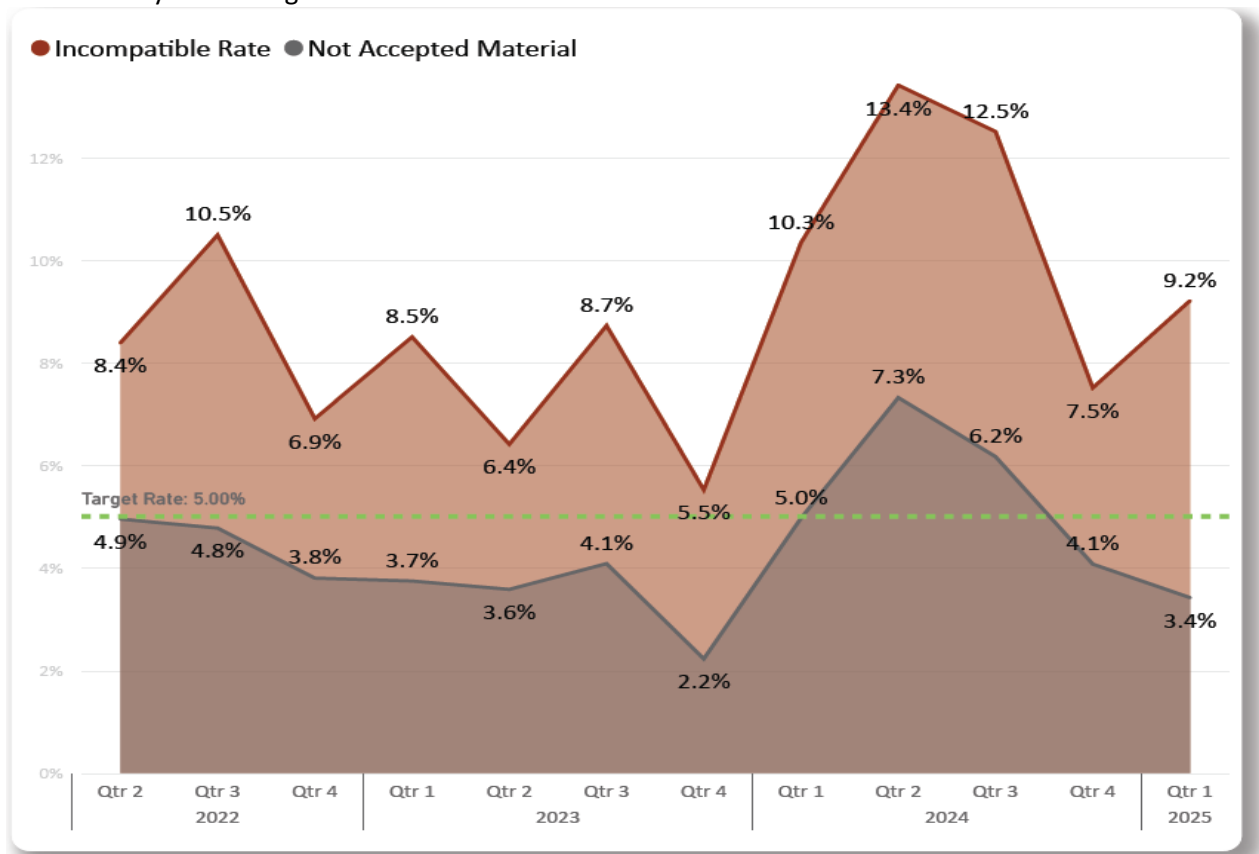


Figure 2. Recycle BC. Contamination Scorecard for the City of Courtenay up to Q1, 2025.

The Statement of Work between the City and Recycle BC requires that materials collected by the Contractor may not contain more than 5% by weight of Not Accepted Materials. Loads exceeding 5% by weight of Not Accepted Materials may be subject to rejection by the Designated Post-Collection Service Provider and may result in Service Level Failure Credits. Based on the current household count served by automated collection, a service level failure rate of \$3,750 could apply to each trailer load delivered to Recycle BC sorting facilities in the Lower Mainland. The City could face fines of up to \$90,000 annually—reducing the annual reimbursement of \$409,000 by about 22%—which may necessitate an increase in user fees.

While the City’s Not Accepted Material contamination rates appear to be near the 5% target, there is concern that resident complacency could cause contamination to rise unchecked. Because Contamination Scorecards are issued only quarterly, the results may come too late to support timely corrective actions. Educational efforts by the City include mobile app campaigns, regular updates to the Waste Wizard recycling encyclopedia, timely responses to resident inquiries, and community outreach at events throughout the year.

Some metrics from the Courtenay Collects mobile app in November 2025 include over 13,000 monthly reminders, over 5,700 addresses with reminders – about half of the households in the service, and 550 Waste Wizard user sessions. Staff regularly update the recycling database of accepted materials as information

becomes available from Recycle BC. In addition, the student ambassador program has been effective in creating a visible presence in the community, as the City attempts to monitor contamination before waste is collected.

**Technology and Contractor Challenges:** Modern internet-based contamination management tools are used to provide photos and locations linked to addresses for staff to engage with residents after contamination occurs. However, the collection contractor's limitations have hampered the full utilization of these tools.

A large part of the collection contract includes the use of contamination management tools to provide photo evidence and locational data, linked to physical addresses, empowering City staff to engage with residents reactively or after contamination occurs during weekly collection cycles. As discussed, the contamination of both recycling and organics has been relatively low; however, should increases occur, the City will be hampered by the collection contractors' limitations.

**Conclusion and Recommendations:** Due to the efforts of residents, garbage going into the landfill has seen dramatic reductions during the transition to automated collection. Improvements can still be made in two key areas: reducing divertible materials sent to the landfill and lowering contamination in the recycling and organics streams. Educational efforts will continue, with a focus on plastics in the organics stream and leveraging new data from recent studies.

CSWM staff and City staff have actively engaged in open dialogue throughout the review of this report, ensuring both concurrence and accuracy of information ahead of the January 14, 2026, Council meeting. Moving forward, both groups are committed to working in close partnership to develop and implement effective contamination reduction strategies. This collaborative approach will include regular, coordinated messaging on contamination impacts, with the shared goal of reducing garbage tonnage and lowering contamination in the organics waste stream. By fostering transparent communication and joint planning, the City and CSWM aim to strengthen their partnership and deliver measurable improvements in waste management outcomes.

#### **POLICY ANALYSIS:**

The City of Courtenay's approach to solid waste management is guided by the Official Community Plan (OCP) and the Solid Waste Management Bylaw No. 3113, 2023. The OCP emphasizes minimizing infrastructure life-cycle costs through conservation and waste diversion, supporting the extension of garbage, yard waste, recycling, and organics services to all properties, and working toward ambitious diversion targets in partnership with the Comox Strathcona Waste Management Board. The Solid Waste Management Bylaw establishes the framework for the control, collection, and disposal of garbage, recyclables, and organic materials, ensuring compliance with provincial regulations and alignment with regional waste reduction goals. Together, these policies reinforce the City's commitment to environmental stewardship, operational efficiency, and the provision of reliable public services, while providing a clear mandate for holding contractors accountable and managing risks associated with contamination.

#### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:**

The City has not received any fines or service level reductions from Recycle BC or CSWM for contamination. The potential service level reductions from Recycle BC would be impactful to solid waste fees. A similar impact has already been seen in the form of a tonnage increase in organics tipping fees, which is projected to increase the basic annual fee for households in the curbside collection service by \$2 in 2026.

**ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:**

Staff will continue to work to educate residents on the importance of waste diversion and provide messaging on reducing contamination. With the information available in Contamination Scorecards from Recycle BC and the recently available garbage and organics waste composition study, staff will have an improved focus for messaging and education efforts in 2026.

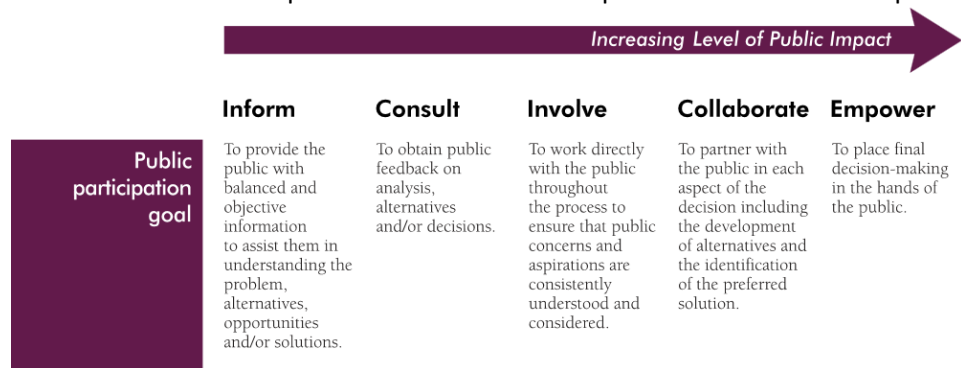
**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:**

This initiative addresses the following strategic priorities:

- Municipal Infrastructure - Continued regional collaboration: Regional Growth Strategy, Liquid Waste Management Plan, South Sewer Conveyance, organics/solid waste, air quality, and regional parks

**PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



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**RECOMMENDATION:** THAT Council receive the “Solid Waste Contamination Management – 2026 Update” briefing note.

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