

PAYING MORE FOR LESS

Burnside Ecosystem Column
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Just the other day, a story appeared in the news from Halifax Water indicating that it would be seeking a rate increase in part because people were using less water. If this was reported accurately, then this seems to be sending completely the wrong signal. I understand that conventional economics suggests that prices will increase as resources get scarcer. But that isn't the case here.

Since the 1970s we have been advocating a society that uses fewer resources. The Science Council of Canada released a report in the mid-seventies called A Conserver Society with a strong rationale for conserving resources. Canadians were among the leaders of the effort to draft a World Conservation Strategy, which was released with much fanfare in the early 1980s. Many Canadian provinces developed their provincial conservation strategies. We could see the challenges that the world faced as population increased and economies exploded creating more waste and pollution, especially greenhouse gases. Unfortunately, most of these were shelved until globally, nationally and provincially we embraced the concept of sustainable development.

Whether it was water or energy or materials, things were being produced and manufactured inefficiently and a large quantity and variety of wastes were being released into the air, water and into landfills. Nova Scotia became a leader in conservation with its policy of recognizing wastes as resources in 1996 and eventually promulgating its ground-breaking Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act (EGSPA). For sustainable prosperity to be achieved, we need to conserve resources.

If we are going to get people on board and effectively conserve resources because it is the right thing to do for the sustainability of the planet, those in charge of water supply, waste treatment, electricity generation and material recycling need to find appropriate ways of penalizing inefficient users and uses of resources and rewarding those who conserve. I can understand the need to charge fees to establish conservation or efficiency programs because these will benefit users in the long run but to suggest that we pay more for using less is not the right way to do things.

Perhaps governments need to look at the disincentives and subsidies that exist in the resource extraction, production and generation systems to make sure that the costs associated with the use of virgin materials are fully covered when compared with costs incurred with conservation and recycling approaches. A few years ago the Genuine Progress Index (GPI) was applied to the analysis of a number of policies, resource management and infrastructure management in Nova Scotia. The Round Table on Environment and Sustainable Prosperity has proposed that full cost accounting should receive further consideration. That means incorporating externalities in our analysis of the costs and benefits of an initiative over a longer term. We should also be looking at the way resources are extracted, processed and manufactured, whether it is our drinking

water or electricity and ensure that the technology and infrastructure doesn't create a situation where we have pay more for less.

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