

Walking in Other People's Shoes

By Moreen Miller



It was an interesting meeting. On one side of the room, a full complement of engineers and officials from one of the largest regions in southern Ontario; on the other, representatives from the Ontario aggregate and road building industries. The issue under discussion – how could the region promote recycling and become greener. Nothing out of the ordinary in that. Almost every municipality in the province has jumped on the environmental bandwagon, touting the virtues of a more sustainable environment and trying to grow a greener economy but there was an “Alice Through The Looking Glass” air to this particular encounter. It wasn’t the municipality castigating the industry for exploiting the environment and putting its own self-interests ahead of the community. It was industry urging the municipality to break free of its own self-imposed constraints and do more to help the environment.

Asphalt pavement (which is 95 percent aggregate) is the most recycled material in North America and yet some Ontario municipalities still refuse to use RAP in their paving contracts. There are millions of tonnes of concrete salvaged from roads and sidewalks stockpiled in yards around the province just waiting to be recycled, and yet there are still some municipalities that will not accept these materials for roadbeds or engineered backfill. Recycling asphalt pavement and concrete aggregate may not be trendy or flashy but it is one of the easiest and most effective ways to preserve our non-renewable resources, save transportation costs, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and save taxpayers money. So why are some municipalities so reluctant to use these valuable resources?

For many in industry it seems inexplicable. As practitioners, we understand the issues, see the challenges and have a predisposition for solving the problems. It would be easy for us to point fingers at the municipalities and blame bureaucratic procedures and an innate aversion to risk as an excuse for inaction. But that won’t solve anything. In fact, we have to assume a measure of responsibility. Instead of throwing up our hands in frustration, we have to understand what the municipalities need to make this sort of program a success. We are not very good at walking a mile in other people’s shoes. We need to be more strategic in our approach.

The first thing municipalities need is a better policy framework. As a leader in recycling asphalt pavement and aggregates, the Ministry of Transportation is a model for every jurisdiction in the province. Provincial policy in other ministries is much less supportive. Aggregate recycling should be considered a mainstream activity in every licensed pit and quarry. The technical requirements for recycled aggregate, based on equivalence to virgin aggregates, should be in all

provincial and municipal specifications. There should also be a firm policy that municipalities must allow aggregate recycling within their jurisdiction (a number of municipalities’ land use regulations explicitly ban recycling facilities effectively blocking the use of recycled materials). In order to use recycled materials, industry needs the space to process them as well.

The second thing municipalities need is confidence in the science, which means we have to continue to raise our level of technical proficiency. Many municipal officials have an aversion to risk, understandably concerned that if pavements made with recycled aggregates fail, they will have to answer to taxpayers. We have to debunk the myth that recycled aggregate is less consistent and therefore inferior to virgin aggregate. We have to work with municipalities to develop tighter specifications, a more rigorous testing program, and a process in which they have confidence. And we can never allow product to go through our members’ gates that does not meet the highest quality standards. We have to prove over and over again that recycled aggregate, properly processed in accordance with best practices, is the equivalent of virgin material.

Finally, going back to the concept of aversion to risk, municipalities need to know that they are not breaking new ground. We have to celebrate the municipalities that have taken a leadership role and by their example show that using recycled aggregate is not only the right thing to do environmentally, it is also the right thing to do technically and economically. To those municipalities that are wavering, we have to say that turn for turn, lane for lane, traffic load to traffic load, roads built with recycled aggregates are every bit the equivalent of any other road in the province. We need to show them existing success stories, and help them benchmark their successes against other municipalities.

There is a fine line between supporting and challenging government on environmental issues. We have to acknowledge the leadership role that municipalities have taken in promoting green initiatives while constructively challenging them to do more. It is up to us to make it happen and that means giving municipalities what they need – the assurance that our industry has the science, the business model, and the consensus for action and responsibility that they can count on. ■

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