**SCMP Article**

**“Small mouth” bins a sign of big changes to come**

It seems that, in Hong Kong, absolutely anything can become a source of controversy. The latest example: rubbish bins. The government started to put new-style bins on the streets in certain districts last month. They have a bigger sticker warning of fines for littering – specifically for leaving garbage outside the bin. But they have smaller holes, making it harder to put big bags of rubbish inside. Public reaction has not been positive.

I must own up to having played a part in this. During my time as chairman of the Council for Sustainable Development, one of our big projects was a public engagement exercise on municipal solid waste charging. With landfills reaching capacity, Hong Kong needed to find ways to reduce the amount of waste it produces, and it became clear that the community broadly recognised the need for action.

It will take a variety of measures to solve the problem – one obvious example is improved recycling of materials. But a key step is to charge households for the amount of waste they produce. The experience of other regional cities like Taipei and Seoul shows us that this gives people incentives to create less waste in the first place.

In other words, the right measures can change people’s behaviour. When people find that waste costs them money from their own pocket, they will make a point of using less wrapping and other unnecessary materials, and that will pressure retailers and manufacturers to use less.

If you go to many regional cities – say, in Japan – you will see piles of identical brightly coloured bags of waste at street collection points on particular days. Those bags with city logos are not free: the residents have to buy them. Anyone trying to use a different sort of bag will get into trouble.

You might ask: couldn’t these residents save money by throwing their rubbish away in bins on the street?

The authorities have thought of that. They have largely removed bins from streets. Walk around these cities, and you will find it almost impossible to throw a wrapper away legally out of doors. Your best choice is to take it home and put it into your paid-for municipal garbage bag.

This is the way Hong Kong needs to go. Although people may not realise it, the government has been reducing the number of bins on our streets in the past year or so. Around 3,000 have been withdrawn, out of some 24,000. The “small mouth” bins are a part of this effort. The new bins have attracted criticism. People are saying they will simply stack big bags of rubbish alongside the bins rather than try to stuff them through the smaller holes.

There is an attitude in Hong Kong that putting waste next to a bin is acceptable, even civic-minded. In fact, it is illegal. But the law is rarely enforced.

Perhaps officials could have planned the implementation of this process differently. Maybe it would be better to make the special paid-for garbage bags compulsory first, and then start making street bins less convenient to use, and then eventually scrapping them.

In practice, it is not so simple. These measures cannot be rolled out across the whole of Hong Kong at the same time. The paid-for bags will probably be introduced in stages in different types of neighbourhoods. Large estates will probably make the transition first.

Maybe it does not make much difference whether officials change the bins on the street at the beginning of this process, or later. The most important thing is to get the message across that things are changing: ultimately everyone will take their rubbish home and pay for it to be collected.

At some stage, enforcement will have to play a role in changing people’s behaviour. People will start to pay attention when they hear that individuals or businesses are being fined for fly-tipping and other illegal disposal of waste. But, hopefully, peer pressure and education will do most to change people’s habits. Past successes in curbing antisocial behaviour like spitting and littering show we can change. If you find the new bin annoying, remember its “small mouth” is giving you a big message.