

Toronto food service businesses are willing to change practices on single-use and reusable foodware – Government support and regulations can help:

Forthcoming regulations from federal and municipal governments to restrict and reduce single-use foodware present an important opportunity to address plastic pollution and achieve waste reduction and climate goals. As these regulations will impact local food service businesses in Toronto, data and insights from local businesses are important to shape policies, including Toronto's Single-Use Reduction Strategy. Here, we present key results from our recent study to inform action items and next steps.

In 2021, the University of Toronto Trash Team and the Toronto Environmental Alliance conducted a study to understand the challenges and opportunities local businesses experience in reducing single-use foodware and switching to reusable alternatives. Surveys and interviews were conducted with 12 small businesses from across Toronto including sit-down restaurants, quick service restaurants, cafes and a bakery. These businesses had varying levels of takeout from less than 1% to 100% of their service, though most businesses interviewed said that the amount of takeout and associated single-use foodware items increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Top Findings and Recommendations For Municipal Policy and Programs:

1) Food service businesses already consider the environment and have taken steps to reduce single-use items. However, many businesses are looking for more support and guidance to further reduce single-use items and switch to reusable alternatives.

- Almost all businesses that participated in the study reported that they have already taken actions to reduce waste, ranging from asking customers before providing single-use items (such as cutlery or napkins) to providing reusable alternatives to single-use items.
- Businesses reported that 'the environment' was the top consideration when purchasing foodware, above cost. However, we noted that many businesses are choosing to purchase more expensive foodware labeled as 'compostable', though it is not compostable in local facilities and is discouraged by the City. Businesses would benefit from guidance on suppliers and clearer education about 'compostable' foodware.

2) Local businesses already offer reusable takeout foodware alternatives - including allowing “bring your own containers” for customers and reusable takeout services - which offer valuable lessons for other businesses.

- Three quarters of businesses interviewed allow customers to bring their own cup or container for takeout. Of the businesses interviewed, 3 cafes currently offer a reusable takeout service, and 3 other businesses are considering it. (A reusable takeout foodware service is where customers can borrow or rent a reusable cup and return it later. This can be offered directly by the business or a third-party service).
- Businesses noted that using reusable foodware saves them money and is also something their customers appreciate.
- Cafes have the most successful examples of reusable takeout, and lessons from these businesses can be shared with other types of food service businesses.

3) A municipal educational campaign targeting customers and the public on waste reduction would help businesses and public participation in waste reduction efforts.

- Clear messages around the City’s Single-Use Reduction Strategy and the benefits of reducing single-use foodware can help increase public participation and support for new programs.

4) Businesses want and will benefit from more guidance and information from the City on the safety of reusable foodware.

- Public health messages clarifying that reusable foodware can be used safely, with guidance on how, could help businesses more confidently promote reusable options to reduce single-use foodware to their customers. Guidance on how to deal with ‘bring your own’ and other reusable foodware will support food service businesses in training and implementing those programs.

5) Businesses are amenable to municipal policies to reduce waste and see the City’s Single-Use Reduction Strategy as a viable approach.

- Some businesses said the City’s policies need to move quickly, and that they want more action to be taken.
- A few businesses noted that setting city-wide regulations and requirements would benefit their business as it would ‘level the playing field’ and reduce risks of losing customers and costs for businesses if the program remains voluntary.

In summary, we found many Toronto food service businesses consider the environment in business decisions and are already taking steps to reduce single-use items, offer reusable options, and noted that these actions can create benefits including cost savings and customer loyalty. Restaurants and cafes in Toronto identified what supports would help them further reduce waste, including education campaigns and consistent municipal policies and programs.



The findings of the study are published in full at:
<https://uofttrashteam.ca/singleusefoodware>

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