



# VICTORIA BINNERS' NEED ASSESSMENT

Prepared by Dare Sholanke  
July 5, 2019



## Table of Contents

Executive summary.....	3
Introduction.....	3
Methodology.....	3
Results and findings.....	5
Binnars' demographics.....	5
Binnars' socio-economic characteristics.....	5
Challenges faced by binnars.....	6
Potential opportunities and constraints.....	9
Recommendations/next steps.....	11
Conclusion.....	14



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary of the four-month Needs Assessment conducted in Victoria, BC to learn about the most pressing needs of local recyclers and to identify if solutions tested in Vancouver could be adapted to the Victoria landscape. Using a mixed method approach, we examined binner demographics, socio-economic characteristics, challenges and opportunities, and potential constraints for the project. We then proposed next steps and concluded that Victoria is fertile ground for a version of Binners' Project to thrive, and its establishment is highly feasible if adequate funds are available.

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

#### **Who are binners?**

Binners are individuals who collect refundable items and other discarded items obtained mostly from bins to supplement their income and support their livelihoods. The act of recovering these recyclables contributes to the circular economy and diverts a considerable amount of waste from landfills. Binners experience stigmatization and social exclusion due to non-permanent housing, mental health challenges, and addictions. In response to these challenges, Vancouver's Binners' Project was founded.

#### **What is Binners' Project?**

Binners' Project, a project on Tides Canada's shared platform, is a group of waste-pickers aided by support staff dedicated to creating economic opportunities, destigmatizing binning, and promoting social cohesion among members of the binning community. The initiative is strategically located in the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver; an area often referred to as 'Canada's poorest postal code' due to the large concentration of people who are impacted by homelessness, addiction, and mental health challenges. Many of these individuals use binning as a means to earn a living. Binners' Project has recorded huge success in improving the quality of life of its members and providing economic opportunities for binners through initiatives such as the waste sorting program, public waste education at events, and the annual Coffee Cup Revolution. Binners' Project has also played a role in destigmatizing binning through increasing government and the local community's recognition of and collaboration with the binning population.

Binners located in Victoria face similar challenges to those in Vancouver. To tackle these challenges, Binners' Project decided to conduct a Needs Assessment in Victoria, with the support of the Mayor of Victoria and the Victoria Foundation. Prior to the commencement of the project in Vancouver, consultations with the binning community were conducted in order to build the community from the



ground up. It was imperative to use this model in Victoria, to determine the feasibility of the project due to the varying characteristics of both cities.

The goal of the Needs Assessment was, therefore, to identify the most pressing challenges and needs of Victoria binners, how economic opportunities can be increased, and if the initiatives developed in Vancouver can be adopted in Victoria. This report provides a summary of the four-month Needs Assessment, detailing the critical needs of binners, opportunities and constraints to the project, and potential solutions.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

A mixed approach was used to understand the circumstances of binners, and to ensure the validity and credibility of findings. This includes the use of mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative surveys and qualitative stakeholder focus groups were used.

### Surveys

A total of 50 surveys were administered to learn more about the demographic characteristics and circumstances facing the binners in Victoria. Prior to administering the survey, questions were drafted by a steering team and reworked by the binners during one of the consultations, in order to best reflect their needs and increase comprehension of the binning community.

### Focus groups (binners meetings)

Bi-weekly consultations were conducted with binners to hear their concerns and ideas about possible solutions to the challenges identified.

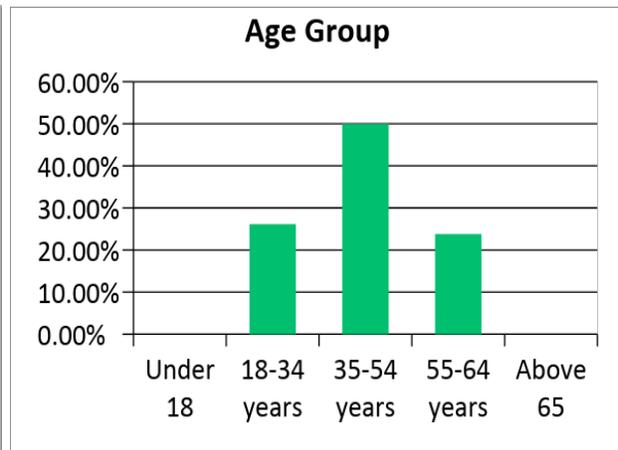
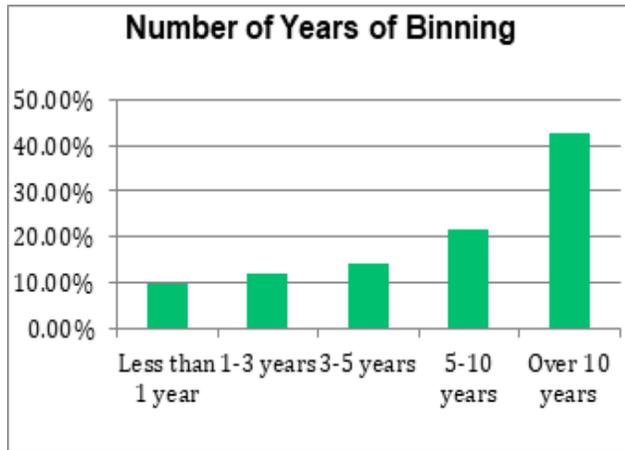
### Stakeholder consultations

Consultations were also conducted with key community stakeholders to understand their perspectives and build this network in Victoria.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### 4.1 Binner Demographics

Most binners identified as male (74%), 24% as female, and one individual identified as non-binary. Half of the participants ranged in age from 35 to 54, while about 26% and 24% reported being between ages 18-34 and 55-64, respectively.

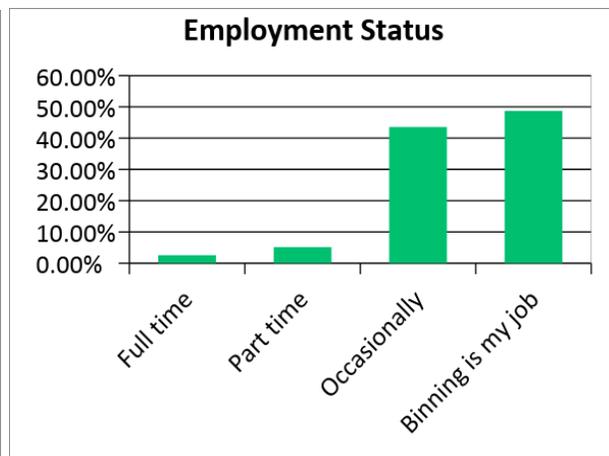
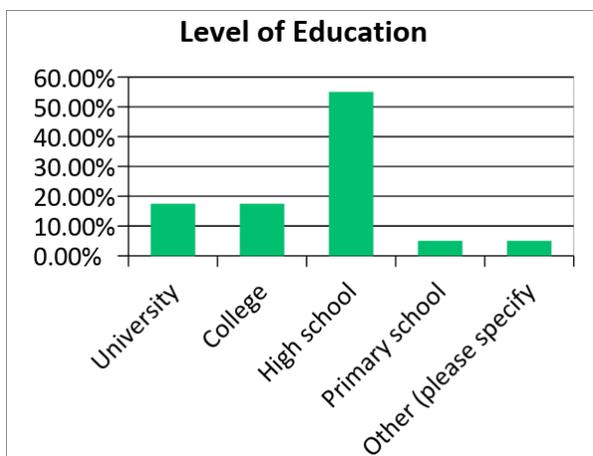


Approximately 70% of participants identified as Caucasian, followed by 22% as First Nations/Metis/Inuit/Indigenous. Also, many binners (over 40%) reported binning for over ten years, followed by 21% binning for 5-10 years. Of note, Over 50% also identified as persons with disabilities.

#### 4.2 Bidders' Socio-economic Characteristics

The survey also showed that high school graduates make up a significant number of the binning population (55%), while 17.5% attended university and college, and 5% attended only primary school. More than half of the bidders are currently experiencing homelessness.

Less than 10% reported being employed either full-time or part-time. Rather, about 90% reported being either occasionally employed (43.6%) or fully unemployed (48.7%), and therefore depend on waste recovery either as their primary means of survival or to support the government social assistance, which about 75% receive.



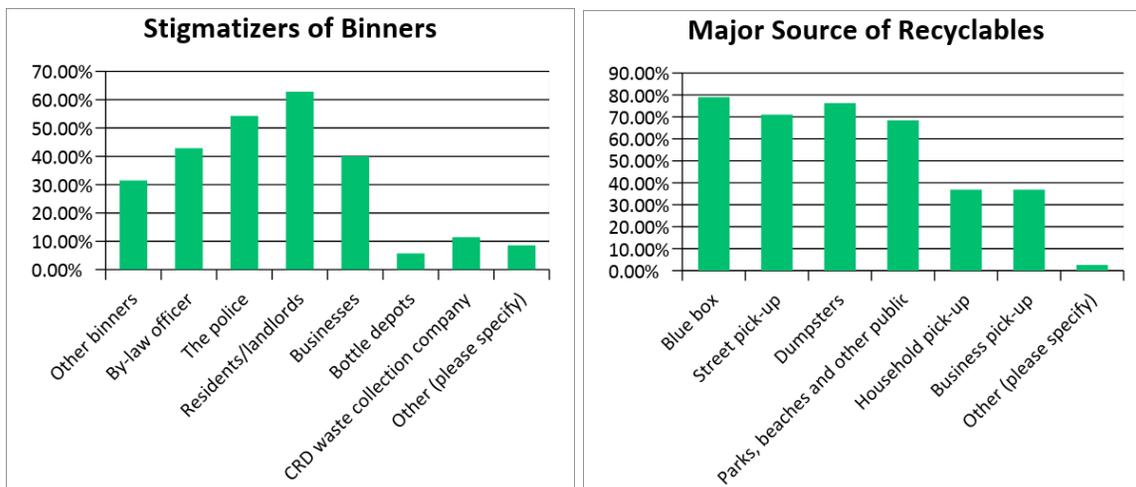
Data on income from binning was not collected as binners were uncomfortable with revealing their income.

### 4.3 Challenges Faced by Binners

The surveys conducted with binners revealed quite a number of challenges they encounter on a daily basis. Potential solutions/strategies to these problems were brainstormed during the bi-weekly focus group meetings held with binners. These challenges and proposed solutions are highlighted below:

#### Stigmatization

As a result of the stigma associated with waste-picking, coupled with Victoria’s recycling bylaws, binners reported experiencing a great deal of stigmatization and harassment mostly from residents/landlords (63%), followed by the police (54%), bylaw officers (about 43%), businesses (40%), and other binners (31%). Few binners (less than 20%) reported being harassed or discriminated against by the bottle depots or Capital Regional District (CRD) collection companies.



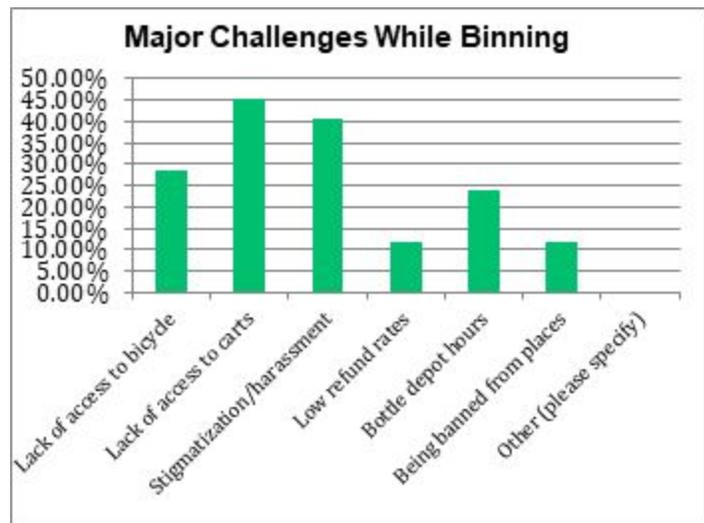
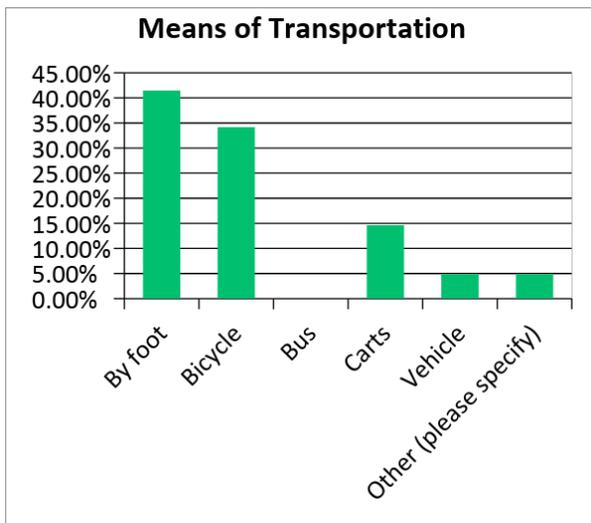
The blue box was identified as a hotspot for collecting recyclable materials. Most binners (about 80%) reported collecting recyclable materials from the blue box, followed by dumpsters, parks and beaches, etc. Although, according to a consulted CRD official, the recycling bylaw that criminalizes binning is currently not being enforced and discussions are ongoing to have it repealed.

*Strategies emerging from focus groups & consultations*

- Create more public awareness on the environmental significance of recovering waste
- Provide means of identification such as uniforms and I.D. cards (for “members”)
- Green bin and/or Bidders Hook for easy collection.

**Lack of effective means of transportation & major challenges**

The ability to transport recovered materials to bottle depots plays a significant role in how much bidders earn as well as how waste is diverted. During consultations, bidders complained about their inability to recover bottles due to their lack of appropriate means of transportation. The majority reported mostly walking to depots (about 40%), while about 34% used bicycles, 15% used hand carts, and 5% used vehicles. Lack of access to carts was also reported as a major challenge faced by bidders while binning (45.2%) followed by stigmatization (40.5%).

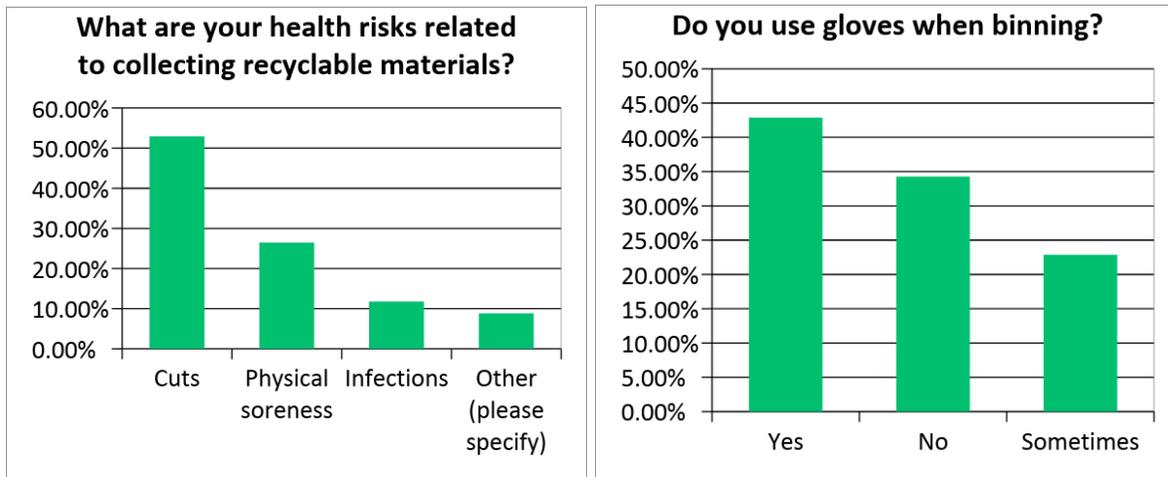


*Strategies emerging from focus groups & consultations*

- Provide carts/trailers for bidders that could also be pulled behind a bike
- Design a special backpack for bidders.

**Occupational health hazards**

Over 90% of bidders reported experiencing hazards such as cuts (53%), physical soreness (26.5%) or infections (11.8%) while binning. This could be linked to the lack of appropriate means of transporting these items, clambering around in dumpsters, and also not using gloves while binning.



Survey results show that over 50% of bidders either sometimes do not use gloves (22.9%) or never use gloves (34.3%). The reasons tendered by most bidders are that they cannot afford them given their significantly low income.

*Strategies emerging from focus groups & consultations*

- Provide personal protective equipment (gloves) and picking equipment
- Provide headlamps for binning at night
- Separate refundables from general recycling by initiating a “green box” program.

#### 4.4 Potential Opportunities and Constraints

To identify the feasibility of the establishment of Bidders’ Project in Victoria, we had several consultations with government officials, potential business partners, bottle depot managers, etc. Factors such as municipal recycling bylaws, geographic landscape and the openness of stakeholders to the initiative were also examined and considered. These revealed the potentials for both successes and possible barriers.

##### 4.4.1 Opportunities

###### Critical mass

The number of bidders excited to join this initiative increased significantly since the commencement of the needs assessment. About 5 participants were present at the first meeting, and the number grew up to 28 bidders in attendance, with a core group of 12 who have become members. Membership, based on the requirements established by Bidders’ Project is attendance at three meetings. Over 60 unique bidders have attended at least one meeting.



*Focus group/binners' meeting at the early stage of the Needs Assessment*

### **Binners hand carts/bike trailers**

Providing a better means of transporting recyclable materials is a critical need identified by binners. In response to this, a local business (Tony's Trailers) has committed itself to partner with the initiative in Victoria by providing up to 12 carts for binners and also providing training on how to build trailers using old, donated shopping carts.

### **Stakeholder support**

Consultations with stakeholders within and outside the government were very productive and positive. We obtained referrals to various businesses and potential partners from these partners. The Mayor of Victoria is also a strong supporter of the initiative and is willing to ensure its success. The stakeholders we consulted are:

- Our Place Society
- Victoria City Councillors
- CRD officials
- Downtown Bottle Depot
- Esquimalt Bottle Depot
- Coalition to End Homelessness
- Victoria Community Association Network (VCAN)
- Fort Properties Ltd
- Victoria Foundation

## Need for bottle pick-up service and waste sorting for apartments

Information gathered from consultations with stakeholders reveal that many apartment buildings do not currently have their waste properly sorted, and are open to having binners provide this service. The Mayor is a supporter of this program and has played a huge role in connecting us with potential businesses, City officials, and partners. We have been and are still contacting more business and apartment managers to seek additional economic opportunities for binners.

## Waste Sorting Program pilot

In response to the need for waste sorting, we decided to pilot and adopt waste sorting, a program that is operational in Vancouver. Through this program, binners are scheduled to visit buildings/businesses to ensure items are in the correct waste streams. Waste is then picked up by the regular haulers, with the refundable material removed by the binners. Multiple community organizations have shown interest in partnering with binners on piloting this program. Also, Fort Properties has committed to piloting the waste sorting program and promised to refer it to other businesses as well. Two binners have been assigned to manage the waste stream and are already doing a great job there.



*Waste sorting at Fort Properties*

## Waste Sorting at events

From a connection with one of the steering team volunteers, we have been awarded a contract by Atomique Productions to sort waste at upcoming events. This is a huge opportunity for the binners to earn additional income, as binners get to earn hourly wages assigned in the contracts. Depending on the contract, binners could also be granted access to the recyclable materials, thus providing additional income. Binners have been actively engaged in waste sorting and public education at recent events in Victoria such as Canada Day, Victoria Car Free Day, and the Village Block Party.



*Binner at the Village Block Party*

### 4.4.2 Constraints

#### Absence of back alleys

Victoria's urban design varies quite distinctly from Vancouver's due to its lack of alleyways. It is anticipated that the lack of alleyways might make the adoption of the Binners Hook unrealistic because residents may have to install the hooks at their doorsteps, which may be quite intrusive. It is also noteworthy that according to reports, some residents find it uncomfortable having binners go through their blue box, let alone letting them come closer to their apartment to get refundables from the hook. However, Montreal, which also lacks alleyways, has successfully implemented a smaller version of the hook for staircase railings and signposts.



## **Plastic bags ban**

Due to the rising concern of plastic waste, the City of Victoria recently prohibited the use of plastic bags to reduce the amount of plastic in landfills and the ocean. This is a constraint on the ability to successfully adopt the Binners Hook initiative as plastic bags are generally used hang refundables on the hook. However, alternative materials could be utilized, such as net bags and other environmentally friendly alternatives.

## **Lack of storage space for carts**

Once we eventually acquire the carts from Tony's Trailers, mentioned above, binners may have difficulty keeping the carts safe as they lack necessary storage space. Although this was not a vital focus of the Needs Assessment, the need for secure storage space for carts may become imperative. Also, due to time and financial constraints, we were unable to explore the possibility of a cart sharing pilot, which would have been very helpful.

## **Existing trap lines/relationships**

It was observed in the course of our consultations and findings that most businesses have existing partnerships with binners who collect their refundables. Also, we acknowledge that there are binners who are not members of the initiative in Victoria, who either have existing relationships with businesses or earn a living by collecting recyclables from the blue box/curbside. Thus, as much as we are excited to secure these opportunities for members of the Victoria binners' initiative, we are wary of these existing relationships and 'trap lines,' so as not to limit other binners' ability to earn a living. These conditions are being considered in the recommendations we propose below.

## **5.0 RECOMMENDATION/NEXT STEPS**

Considering the challenges and opportunities mentioned above, this section highlights some potential strategies or action plans to address these and ensure the successful establishment of Binners' Project or the implementation of its programming in Victoria. Also worthy of note is that this is an organic and grassroots process, and we've ensured binners' opinions are adequately represented and incorporated herein.

### **Coffee Cup Revolution (CCR)**

The CCR is an annual one-day event in Vancouver where binners recover disposable coffee cups and return them for a 5 cent refund. The event is held at a one-time pop-up depot open for just three hours. Every year, thousands of disposable coffee cups are recovered by Vancouver binners. For



example, over 40,000 coffee cups were recovered in 2014 when the first CCR was held. In October of 2019, over 90,000 coffee cups were recovered. The CCR is a key initiative of Binners' Project, and the Victoria group plans have its first CCR in 2020 with the aim to:

- highlight issues around single-use items, and
- create more public awareness about binners' role in promoting the circular economy and environmental sustainability, as well as the financial benefit that the deposit-refund system represents for the binners.

### **Waste sorting program pilot**

The waste sorting program offers income opportunities where binners regularly visit buildings to ensure items are recycled into the correct streams. At the same time, they remove the refundable materials and receive an honorarium in compensation for their time. This program is not just of great benefit for binners as it provides additional income and improves their livelihoods, but it also promotes environmental sustainability. We are currently piloting the waste sorting program with one business partner who expressed keen interest in the pilot. This would be an avenue to learn about binners' capacity, work ethic, and best practices. This knowledge will equip our team to identify strategies to boost binners capacity and work efficiency, which gives us more leverage when approaching other potential businesses as well as to grow the program after the pilot stage. By securing more waste sorting contracts with more businesses, binners will be able to earn even more, providing a more sustainable means of livelihood.

### **Storage space for Tony's Trailers carts**

Tony's Trailers would be an enormous benefit to binners, allowing them to collect and transport more refundables safely without using shopping carts which generate noise and increase the likelihood of harassment by police. But the major challenge with these carts is binners' ability to keep them safe when not in use, particularly overnight. The lack of storage space is a crucial problem faced by the binners in Victoria as the majority are homeless. We are therefore looking at partnering with the Bottle Depot, as they have expressed the possibility of storing carts on their site. This would allow the carts to be shared amongst members of the initiative rather than being owned individually. This model is similar to a pilot initiative by Binners' Project in Vancouver, called the Universal Cart Initiative, where purpose built carts for binning will live on the streets, readily available to members for use and sharing. Based on our dialogue with binners and with the depot manager in Victoria, two binners could be stationed at the bottle depot in the mornings and evenings to dispatch and receive carts respectively. This means that the carts will be available for collection in the morning and returned in the evening. Due to time constraints, we were unable to pilot this program.



## **Green box initiative/Binners Hook**

Due to the lack of back alleyways, it is anticipated that the Binners Hook might not be widely accepted as it could be more intrusive if placed inside a yard – unlike picking up recyclable materials from the curbside. And although plastic bags have been banned, cloth bags could be used with the Binners Hook. Instead, we propose to use both the regular Binners Hook, the smaller one developed in Montreal, and a “green box”. This would give residents the choice of either putting refundable beverage containers in the green box for binners to pick up, or putting them on a hook which could be attached to a fence or railing. With this initiative, binners will not have to go through the blue box in search of refundables. It may also reduce the noise and mess of rifling through the blue box. Although consultations are still ongoing, so far most binners are in support of this idea.

After examining the municipal recycling bylaw, we realized that implementing the green box initiative might be quite challenging due to the prohibition of binners from obtaining refundable materials from the curbside. In response to this, we contacted a CRD official to inquire about the bylaw and informed him about the green box initiative. He was quite supportive of the idea and mentioned that the by-law is currently not being enforced and is under consideration for repeal. Binners are, thus, less likely to get harassed by the police and other by-law officers while using the green box if implemented.

For a start, we plan to pilot the program in one neighbourhood to learn residents’ response and openness to the initiative and also to learn about other modalities. This would enable us to identify unanticipated challenges and respective strategies, providing us with valuable information on its long term feasibility in other neighbourhoods. Prior to the pilot program, community/neighbourhood associations will be contacted to ensure their support. However, during our recent presentation to the board of executives of the community associations, they seemed quite interested in the green box initiative, but concerns were raised about distorting the existing traplines of other binners who might not be members of Binners’ Project in Victoria. To this effect, conversations are currently ongoing on strategies to avoid this issue.

## **Public engagements at events**

As part of the strategies to destigmatize binning, arrangements were made to get a booth at public events for Victoria binners. Selected binners were paired with volunteers to create room for conversations with members of the public. Considering the general ignorance about the role binners play in waste recovery and environmental sustainability, this was an opportunity to inform the public about the economic and environmental significance of binners’ work. Further opportunities like this will be explored.



## Funding/potential grants

The Victoria Foundation funded this four-month Needs Assessment. For the initiative to continue, additional funds will be required

1. To support core staff who will be responsible for project management, partnership development, promotion, fundraising, organizing training and ongoing assessment, and other core operational activities
2. For the Coffee Cup Revolution event and bike trailer-carts for binners, as well as;
3. To provide honorariums, uniforms, membership cards for binners joining the project, along with rent, office supplies, materials such as gloves and flashlights.

Potential funding partners include:

- Victoria Foundation
- City of Victoria
- Vancity Credit Union
- Coast Capital Savings
- McLean Foundation
- Greater Victoria Saving & Credit Union Legacy Fund
- Encorp Pacific
- Bottle Depot

## Stakeholder engagement

### 1. Downtown Bottle Depot:

As mentioned, Bottle Depot was willing to pilot a cart-sharing system at their location with the carts from Tony's Trailers. The depot management expressed its commitment to not only grant a storage space for the carts but also organizing a fundraising event for the program.

### 2. Victoria Community Association Network (VCAN):

VCAN granted us the opportunity to have a presentation to its board members and executive directors of its member associations on June 19, 2019. At the presentation, attendees were educated about Binners' Project, the findings from the Needs Assessment, and initiatives like the waste sorting program and the green box program. We also proposed the possibility of partnering with them through piloting the waste sorting program at some community centres, referring the Victoria binners initiative to residents and businesses, and introducing the green box program and Binners Hook to residents. There was a lot of interest around our propositions except for one concern – the tendency to disrupt existing traplines of other binners who are not members of Binners' Project. One of the board members, Kalen Harris, also attended one of our binners meeting on May 9th, 2019.



### 3. Oakland Community Centre:

Following our presentation at the VCAN Board Meeting, one of the attendees from the Oakland Community Centre reached out to us to get us started in sorting waste at the Community Centre and connect us with the Portland Hotel Society. We are currently working around the logistics for that.

### 4. Island Farms and Home Depot:

Island Farms shall be contacted to identify their interest in partnering with the project on the green box program by donating milk crates. Due to concerns raised by binners on the small size of Island Farms' boxes, we will also contact Home Depot to identify their interest in supporting the green box program by donating or discounting crates. The boxes will also be painted, and crests will be attached to them before selling to residents. Although discussions are still ongoing and a final decision is yet to be made, the plan is to ask interested residents to purchase the boxes to pilot the program. Alternatively, boxes would be purchased by the steering team and stored at the Next Steps office before being distributed. It is also expected that residents will be responsible for the maintenance of the box just as they do the blue box.

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Based on this Needs Assessment, we are confident that Victoria is a fertile ground for a version of Binners' Project to thrive, considering not only the incredible support and interest shown by stakeholders but also the enthusiasm and eagerness displayed by the binners. However, this can only be achieved with the availability of adequate funds. The steering team is working to identify additional funding opportunities.

Furthermore, building upon the results from the Needs Assessment, Our Place Society, through the Next Steps to Employment Office has committed to take on the management as well as organizing fundraising events for the initiative. It has also started a four-month pilot ("Phase 2") of the initiative from June to September 2019. This transition occurred with a handoff and granting of leftover funds from Tides Canada Initiatives – Binners' Project, in Vancouver, which will become a sister group to the Victoria initiative. In the meantime, consultations with binners are ongoing to create a new name and visual identity.

The initiative in Victoria has rebranded to the Diverters Project, and will continue operation under Our Place Society who now has full operational and financial responsibility over the initiative.