



PHOTO: ANDREW LEONG

## CYCLING RECYCLERS

**Aaron Richard and partner Katie Harris run Cowichan Recyclists, using bike and trailer to help businesses in their town on Vancouver Island, Canada, to fulfil their recycling obligations. Aaron explains how it happened.**



PHOTO: MELANIE WATSON

Be it the crow of a yawning rooster, the chirp of a distant commuter train's whistle or the light of dawn shining through the half-open blinds, there are many peaceful ways to wake up in the morning.

Being shaken and jarred by a bone-grinding rumble as a gargantuan garbage truck aggressively idles outside, belching thick diesel smoke through your bedroom window, is not one of them.

Every Tuesday we'd hear the garbage truck roll up and listen as it idled outside our apartment. It seemed to us a grotesque symbol of our society's rampant consumerism, coupled with environmental irresponsibility, to have this giant, polluting vehicle whose sole purpose is to pick up waste.

We thought there had to be a better way. Research led us to vehicles with engines running on alternative energy systems, such as waste vegetable oil and electric, but the cost of these eco-friendly vehicles was beyond our reach.

The low-impact, low-cost attributes of a bike and trailer quickly became the most attractive solution. We both had bikes already, and we knew we could have the trailer made locally, which was important to us. And the affordability of the idea meant we could start the service right away.

### BUSINESS NEED

Duncan, a town on Vancouver Island with a population of 5000, consists mainly of businesses. It is the main hub of commerce for the surrounding Cowichan Valley Regional District (CVRD), an area served with a mandatory, comprehensive curbside recycling program for its 77,000 residents.

Mixed paper, plastics, cardboard and tin are picked up from homes on a twice-monthly basis. To encourage recycling, the materials don't need to be separated – that job is done at a privately owned sorting station.

It's in the CVRD's best interests to divert residential recyclables away from the garbage, not only to lessen the impact on the environment, but also for economics. CVRD trash is trucked to a landfill 400 kilometres away, while recyclables leave the hands of local government at the sorting station.

Businesses, however, are left to find their own private service for recycling pickup. And they have to do so, as the CVRD have a bylaw prohibiting recycling from going to the landfill. But there just wasn't an easy service being offered to businesses. We found a lot of store owners were either spending much of their own time doing their recycling, or throwing it in the garbage anyway.

So there was a definite niche in the market for the service we wanted to offer.

### TRAILER TIME

After purchasing a 'Bin-Picker' trailer from Tony's Trailers ([www.tonystrailers.com](http://www.tonystrailers.com)) in Mill Bay, a mere 20 km ride away, Cowichan Recyclists was born. This trailer had been designed for people who spend their time on the streets, trying to survive by getting useful items out of other people's dumpsters [see 'Binners' Bikes' in Issue 18, and 'News' in Issue 20 -Ed]. It could withstand all sorts of abuse and carry over 200 pounds (90 kg) so it was a good fit for our purposes.

With a starting client list of eight businesses, we launched Cowichan Recyclists on September 26, 2007, offering monthly, twice-monthly or weekly pickup schedules.

Right away, it became apparent there was a need for the service and businesses began to sign up. As well as just doing the pickups, we go into the businesses and work with the staff to make it easy to recycle, which I think they appreciate. Our goal is to help the area achieve zero waste.

We don't have to advertise. Just riding around with a bike and trailer is huge exposure. I constantly have people stop me and ask where I got the trailer and what I'm up to. People love the idea and the simplicity of it all.

We take the materials to a private company called Harper's Recycling, at no cost. They take everything from glass to batteries, paper to plastics. Most of our clients



PHOTO: AARON BICHARD

are small retail shops and offices, so mostly have paper, cardboard and plastic packaging to dispose of.

Harper's is just a flat two kilometre ride away, but with a growing client list the number of trips is increasing rapidly. After just 10 weekly pickups notched up since September, we now have 40 clients and are contemplating adding another day of service. We're at the point where our Wednesday pickup is turning into a solid seven hours of riding, so it's probably time to expand.

We both run freelance businesses out of our home so finding the time to grow has been a challenge. With her background in radio broadcasting, Katie sends commercial voice-over reads recorded in our home studio to clients throughout North America. I write and takes photos for various publications as a freelance journalist.

We also run Cowichan Recyclists from our home, a second-floor apartment. Where a couch could go, we've got a tarp and our bikes, trailer and storage bins. Muddy wheels and spokes are a permanent fixture in the living room. Vancouver Island is aptly known as the Wet Coast of Canada, and we get an annual rainfall of one metre in the Cowichan Valley, along with around 50 cm of snow each year. Sometimes it's the weather that seems like the biggest hurdle in our business plan.

### JUST THE START

Among many people we meet there's now a growing desire to move to more ecologically friendly ways of doing things. But aside from ecological arguments, we also find that using bicycles to do tasks usually done by motor vehicles can provide a better sense of personal accomplishment, while also slowing work down to a manageable, human level.

We're working on setting up a program where people in the community can sign out a trailer for the day free of charge, which will, we hope, encourage people to use their cars less for short-haul trips.

We're also keeping a close eye on other bike-based businesses throughout the world offering services such as organic grocery delivery, compost pickup and courier runs, as all of those have potential in our area, too.

We have both been passionate about recycling for years and had wanted to find a way to help the community and the environment, so it's great to now be doing something so positive. The experience has convinced us that for small communities like Duncan, bikes and trailers could play a pivotal role in the upcoming years, offering a real solution before alternative, renewable energy systems are widely available to residents.

I don't think recycling is the end-point of this business. It's more like the beginning.

**Aaron Richard**

Cowichan Recyclists: Tel 1-250-732-3619 or see [www.cowichanrecyclists.com](http://www.cowichanrecyclists.com)



PHOTO: KATIE HARRIS

**Aaron takes the trailer for a spin through downtown Duncan in the sunshine.**

**Katie sorts recyclables at a community drop spot provided by tax money from the local government.**



PHOTO: AARON BICHARD

**MAIN PICTURE: Katie and Aaron load their trailer with empty soup tins at the local food bank, one of the four community charities supported by Cowichan Recyclists.**

**FAR LEFT: Aaron stops in inclement weather in downtown Duncan for a quick photo, with a full load of recyclables on board.**

**LEFT: Katie riding through town, even with an empty trailer, often helps raise awareness of the new service.**