We Built the Bins. But Did We Build the Buy-In?

Waste is a people problem: community engagement in First Nations solid waste

Roshan Boorada, Solid Waste Community Coordinator, TSAG



Infrastructure Only Works When People Use It



Infrastructure
Bins, transfer stations, hauling



People
Habits, trust, values

Most funding goes to the first. Most results depend on the second. **Which investment creates lasting change?**

Three Challenges Show Up Across Nations

01



Improper sorting

- Food scraps and diapers in the recycling
- Batteries and paint in household garbage

Sound familiar? Show of hands

02



Underused infrastructure

- A new depot that sits half-empty
- Waste still burned or dumped at the old site

03



Disconnect from community values

- Few people come to info sessions
- Programs that feel like outside rules

What Sticks Is Ongoing, Community-Led Work

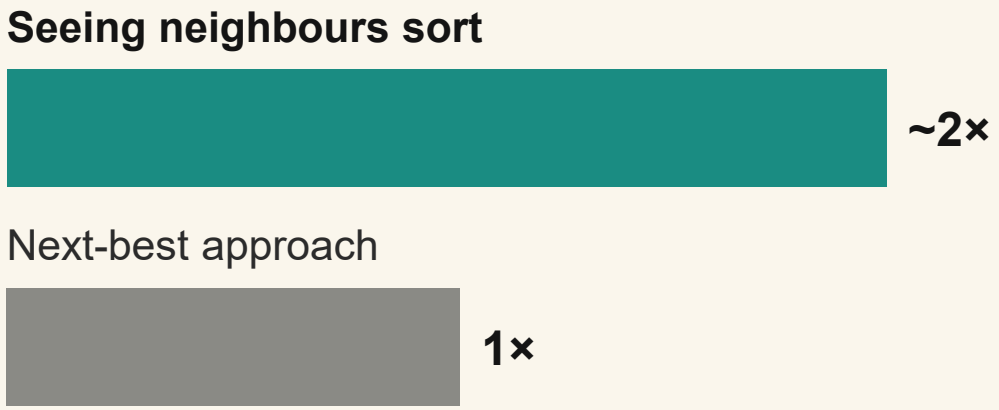
STOP DOING		START DOING
Flyers and mail-outs nobody reads	→	Invite people **face to face** where they gather
Programs designed outside the community	→	Plan **with the Nation,** on community timelines
One-time events with no follow-up	→	Hold **regular events** people can count on

Information Alone Barely Changes Waste Habits

2×

Seeing neighbours sort had about **twice the effect** of the next-best approach[1]

Relative effect on recycling (next-best approach = 1×)



Flyers, prompts and pledges on their own: weak to negligible[2]

People sort when they see their neighbours sorting.

1. Varotto & Spagnolli, Journal of Environmental Psychology (2017). 2. Meta-analysis of 206 effect sizes, Journal of Cleaner Production (2023). Full references in speaker notes.

The Research Confirms What Our Communities Already Know

01

Reliable services make participation easier.

Studied: Garden Hill and Wasagamack residents interviewed, where regular service was lacking
Found: 27 of 27 dumped or burned their waste[1]

02

Community involvement builds trust and ownership.

Studied: 12 western Canadian First Nations
Found: most credited success to regular pickup, hauling and community involvement[2]

03

Family, Elders and cultural teachings reinforce lasting habits.

Studied: 52 Peguis and Heiltsuk members interviewed
Found: learning through family, ceremony and band meetings led to reuse and less waste[3]

Success story

Tsuut'ina Thrift Fair

A free community swap, with education booths alongside

Clothing · household items · books · kids' items



800+
items donated

350–420
items rehomed

41
most by one visitor

~5 hrs
start to finish

Run by Tsuut'ina, supported by TSAG.

Source: TSAG, Sep 18, 2026

It Worked Because It Felt Like Community, Not A Program



Social connection

A gathering, not a rule



Community values

Resourcefulness and caring for one another



Nation leadership

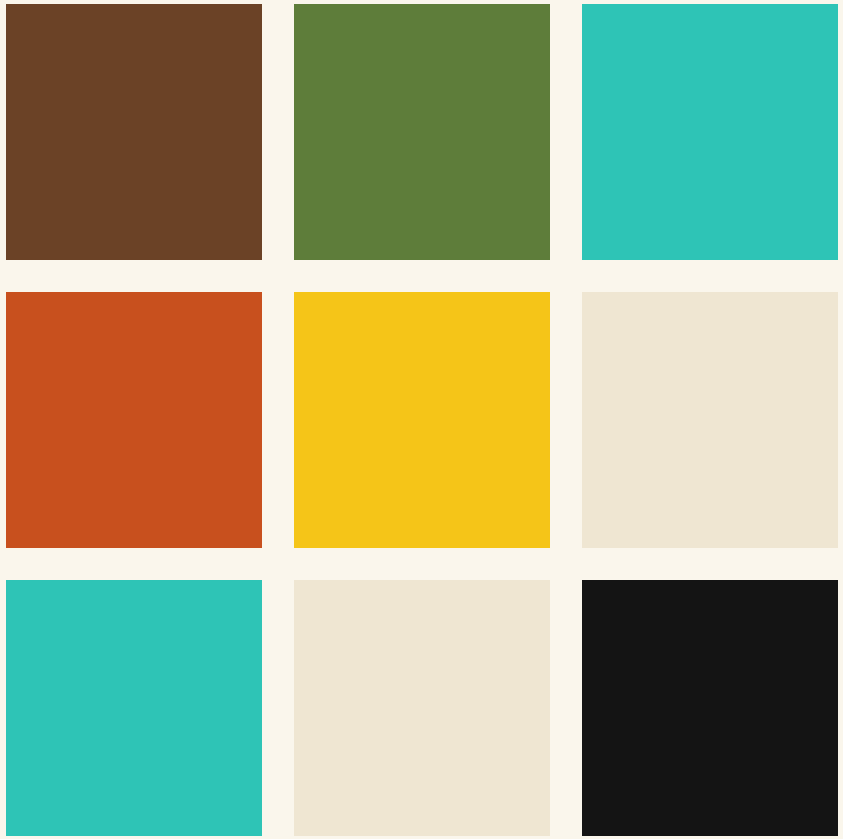
Tsuut'ina ran it; TSAG supported

Audience conversation · 2 minutes

Turn to Your Neighbour

What's one community initiative that got people excited to take part?

Why did it work?



Three Ways TSAG Can Help Your Community

YOUR COMMUNITY WANTS TO…	TSAG CAN HELP WITH…
Engage youth	Future Keepers · Educational boxes · Youth case competitions
Get people participating	Community cleanups · Thrift fairs · Engagement support
Improve waste practices	Waste audits · Operator training · Dumpsite mapping

You don't have to build your next community initiative alone. **Talk to TSAG about where to start.**

Three Things to Try in Your Nation

1

Start where people already gather

EXAMPLE

A sorting booth at a feast, powwow or bingo night

FIRST STEP

Ask to set up a table at the next community event

2

Build ongoing programs, not single events

EXAMPLE

A swap or cleanup on the same weekend every season

FIRST STEP

Put the next date on the Nation calendar now

3

Put youth and Elders up front

EXAMPLE

Students lead a sorting demo while an Elder shares teachings

FIRST STEP

Invite one classroom and one Elder to plan with you

Youth Carry the Habits Home



Future Keepers

Grades 4 to 12 · Medicine Wheel teachings · Free to schools

Youth Case Competitions

Teams solve a real waste scenario and present to Elders and leadership

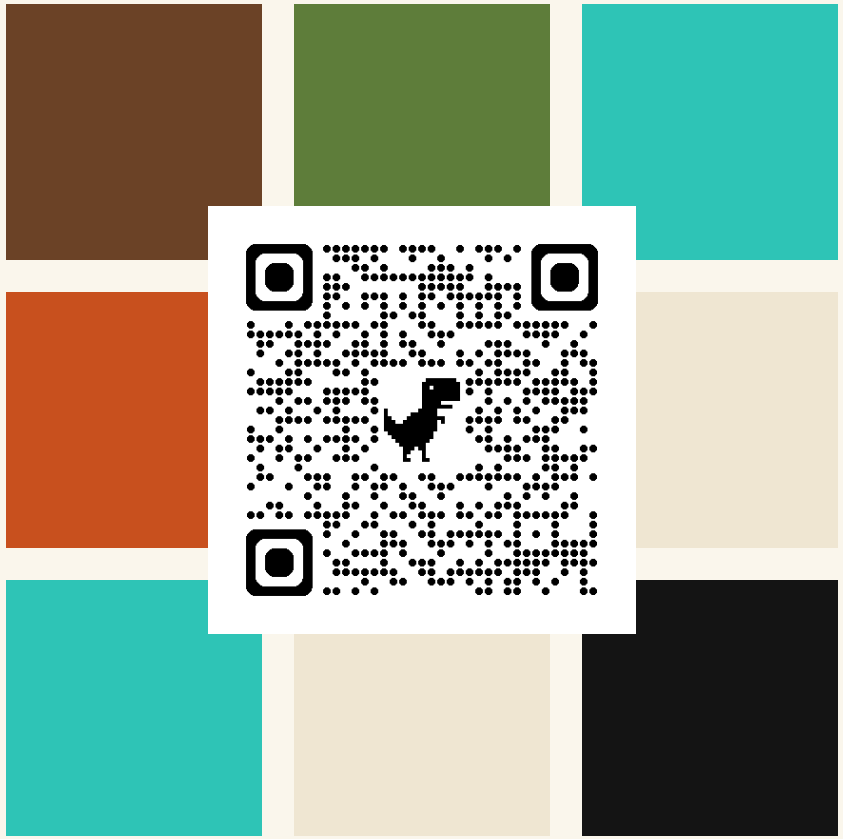
4 **classrooms** in the first Future Keepers trial across Alberta

Your 90-Day Challenge

Bins Hold Waste. People Hold the Change.

Pick one idea. Take it home. Start it within 90 days.

Write yours down now and ask how TSAG can help.



Thank You

Questions? Connect with TSAG Solid Waste.

Roshan Boorada: Solid Waste Community Coordinator

Work: (780) 483-8601 Ext. 109

Cell: 587-590-9403

rboorada@tsag.net

Share your 90-day commitment or ask us where to start.

