

Location the only issue in ethanol debate

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Date: Feb 07, 2008



John Devine says there has to be a better way to solve the issue of a proposed ethanol plant for Barrie

Everyone wants to protect the environment.

It's a motherhood issue. But like all such issues, the details can get in the way.

Take the *Kyoto Protocol*, for instance. Canada happily signed on to the protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. But the saying was easier than the doing. How do you wean a society off industry that produces greenhouse gas without throwing the economy out of whack, and scores of people out of work?

It quickly became apparent that Canada wasn't going to meet its *Kyoto* targets. It doesn't mean Canadians don't care about the environment; they do, passionately. But reality can often take the wind out of principle.

The same scenario is playing out in Barrie on a much smaller scale.

Ethanol has been touted as a tactic to battle climate change; when mixed with gasoline, it reduces harmful emissions. Ethanol production has strong support from the province. All gasoline sold in Ontario must contain an average of at least five-per-cent ethanol.

The 12-year \$520-million Ontario Ethanol Growth Fund aims to provide capital and operating assistance to produce and sell ethanol.

In short, the production of ethanol is government policy and a key component of Ontario's environmental platform.

So with all this support and rationale, why is the plan to build an ethanol plant in Barrie so mired in controversy? In real estate terms, it's about location, location, location.

When Northern Ethanol first set its sights on the old Molson brewery as the site of a new ethanol plant, the future of the region was still up in air. The previous council, led by Rob Hamilton, wanted to maintain an industrial presence in the area, and fought North American Corp.'s plans to rezone the adjacent Park Place lands, formerly Molson Park, to commercial from industrial to clear the way for retail development of the property.

That battle was decided at an Ontario Municipal Board hearing, with the ruling going in North American's favour.

Park Place is currently under development. All four corners of the Mapleview Drive/Highway 400 zone are commercial. The area is irrevocably commercial. Close by are neighbourhoods, schools and parks.

So while the production of ethanol has environmental benefits and the full support of the government of Ontario, it's increasingly becoming obvious the targeted location for the plant is out of place given the existing nature of the area.

Is there not a way to turn this into a win/win situation? Is there land nearby, perhaps away from built-up areas, which would meet Northern Ethanol's needs, including being connected to rail?

Is there not another way to produce ethanol than building a plant in the middle of an established commercial and residential area? Surely, the answer is yes.