

Effects of ethanol plant to be studied

By Jessica Verge
June 18, 2008

A Durham-based company looking to build an ethanol plant near Oshawa's waterfront was met with opposition from both city council and community members at a public meeting held Monday night. Some 200 people came out to the General Motors Centre, which was chosen to accommodate an expected larger crowd, where T-shirts and buttons in support of ethanol production in Oshawa were handed out. The meeting was the result of FarmTech Energy Corporation's application to amend the Oshawa Official Plan and build an ethanol— a bio-fuel made from corn—refinery near the harbour.

The proposed site would be bordered by the harbour to the west, Second Marsh to the east and Lake Ontario to the south. FarmTech's president, Dan O'Connor, and a team of advisors provided the crowd with a brief presentation before being grilled by members of council's development services committee on topics ranging from waste to financing. The \$185 million projected is estimated to create 50 direct jobs and 650 indirect jobs, mostly in logistics. Councillors wanted to know why FarmTech is eyeing the harbour instead of setting up shop in a rural community where the corn is grown but O'Connor says it's a matter of geography and logistics with proximity to both local corn supply and the GTA market.

"The port is a critical part of the economy of this plant," he says. "There really is no better way to move product efficiently (than by water)." And O'Connor says the plant will be odourless and emit no waste into the surrounding environment. But some Oshawa residents aren't buying the idea of a clean, green plant. In recent years, the Friends of the Second Marsh have partnered with various groups, from the City of Oshawa to Environment Canada, to rehabilitate the wetland.

"The construction and operation of a bio-ethanol refinery so close by, with its noise, dust, vapours, odours, light pollution and attracted vermin, will put that investment at risk," says Hugh Peacock, Friends of the Second Marsh president. "This is a clear case of incompatible land use." Others are worried about what the plant will mean to property values. Norman Bear, who lives nearby on Farewell Street, fears the added industry will jeopardize values and believes if the public doesn't want this on government land then it shouldn't be built.

"The land is owned by the people of Oshawa and the citizens of Canada," says Bear, adding that he also worries what will happen if the ethanol industry dies and the city is left with "another rusting hulk on the lake". But proponents of the ethanol plant believe it'll be a boost to Oshawa's economy. "It would mean a significant financial investment in our community," says Gary Valcour, chairman with the Oshawa Harbour Commission. One thing both sides agree on, however, is that this issue is far from over.

"This is a very emotional issue," says Louise Parkes, councillor for Wards 5 and 6 and chair of development services. "We have a lot of work to do." Parkes believes if the plant had been proposed in a different spot, approving the application would have been a slam-dunk but its proximity to Oshawa's waterfront makes the issue controversial.

Now council is planning a trip to Sarnia this Friday to tour their ethanol plant and learn more about its affect on the community. In the meantime, city staff will take the comments made at Monday's meeting and report back to development services with a recommendation.