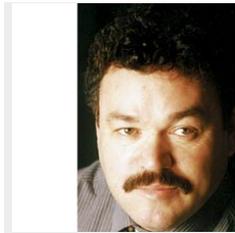


Did ethanol fuel Premier's 'save-the-lake' visit?

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John muses aloud on whether the premier's visit was aimed at undoing the controversy created by the proposed ethanol plant

The Premier came calling last Friday with his environmental hat perched firmly upon his head, and was greeted by a mixture of surprise and expectation at the Lake Simcoe Summit.

No one expected Dalton McGuinty to drop by, but his presence perhaps takes some context when considering another local story with environmental overtones: the controversial ethanol plant proposed for the site of the former Molson brewery.

Many in Barrie are vehemently opposed to the plant, and this hot potato has landed squarely in the McGuinty government's lap.

Short of a miracle at some future Ontario Municipal Board hearing, only the Ministry of Environment can halt the plant in its tracks by denying it a Certificate of Approval. At a recent question-and-answer session before city council, ministry officials made it clear the plant would be judged on its technical merits alone, and not the suitability of the proposed location.

Read between the lines and it probably means the plant will get the ministry's blessing, especially when you consider how wedded the Liberals are to the goal of using ethanol as a fuel additive.

Ontario currently requires at least five per cent ethanol to be in all gasoline sold in the province.

The government is putting your money where its mouth is in the pursuit of this objective; the Ministry of Agriculture and food recently announced \$30 million in grants to four ethanol-producing plants.

That little fact was eagerly pointed out by Tory MPP Joe Tascona in a story that ran on Simcoe.com last Friday, the same day as McGuinty's surprise visit to the lake summit.

The whiff of politics is in the air.

So, considering all of this, McGuinty's visit isn't really that surprising. Clearly the Liberals are in need of a bit of environmental good news in this riding, with an election due this fall. What better way to do this than by becoming a champion of the lake?

Of course, it's all just promises at this point. Presumably the Liberals will need to be returned to office for the promise to become a reality.

McGuinty's support for the lake came with a caveat for those hoping new legislation will halt the resort development at Big Bay Point. Not so, said the Premier. Legislation will impact new development, not those already approved such as Big Bay Point resort.

It's unlikely legislation to protect the lake will include a moratorium on development. Rather, it will likely focus on controlling what goes into the lake. That will be a significant step in the effort to save Lake Simcoe.