

Fuelling Change Part 4: Smell not an issue near Sarnia-area ethanol plant

Avid opponents changed mind once facility began operation

Fri Jul 25, 2008

By Jillian Follert



DURHAM -- Ben Leatherdale is the first one to say he was against an ethanol plant being built near his sprawling rural property in St. Clair Township.

"I was pretty upset, all the neighbours were," he said. "We formed a group, we got a lawyer. We did everything we could to fight it. But the Suncor people kept assuring us there wouldn't be any problems, and by God, they were right."

Two years after Suncor Energy's St. Clair ethanol plant began production, Mr. Leatherdale said he has no complaints about noise or odour from the facility -- except for "maybe once or twice catching a little whiff that smells like bread baking."

Mr. Leatherdale's property is one of a handful of farms located within a kilometre or two of the Suncor plant.

The rest of the area is refineries and industrial plants, set among corn fields and miles of flat rural land.

The closest significant residential area sits about four kilometres down the road on St. Clair Parkway, a long, upscale street boasting mini-mansions set far back from the road, their backyards overlooking the sparkling St. Clair River.

"There's never any smell here," resident Jacqueline Shelly said while out walking her dog. "It doesn't bother us at all." Just down the street at the No Frills grocery store, area residents Joanne Weeks and Linda Davidson said they were originally alarmed by the prospect of an ethanol plant near their homes, saying the biggest concern was plunging property values.

"That doesn't seem to have happened," Ms. Weeks said. "It was much ado about nothing."

"The only problem I have with it is that it's ugly when you see it on the horizon," Ms. Davidson added. "But we already have so many plants like that, one more doesn't make that much difference." Suncor's St. Clair Ethanol Plant began production in July 2006.

The facility has the largest production capacity of any ethanol plant in Canada, producing 200 million litres per year. In December 2006, Suncor announced plans to double its capacity to 400 million litres per year. The expansion will be completed in early 2009.

There is no noticeable odour or noise from the road leading to the facility.

Once on the property itself, a low drone is audible and the air smells faintly of bread and popcorn.

The plant isn't particularly attractive -- rows of squat grey cylinders and boxy grey buildings tower over rail tracks and driveways where trucks file in and out.

It employs a "dry mill" process to turn corn into ethanol, which means the entire corn kernel is ground into flour, after which the starch in the flour is converted to ethanol through fermentation.

FarmTech would also employ a dry mill process at its proposed Oshawa plant, using technology from ICM Inc. that is the same method used in St. Clair.

"Wet milling" is the other option for ethanol production and is used in several Ontario facilities, including plants in Chatham and Collingwood.

Those facilities have made headlines in recent months, with politicians and residents in those areas complaining about the stench.

Wet milling starts with the corn being steeped in warm water and chemicals so the germ can be removed. The kernels are then ground into a slurry and milled several times to isolate the starch, protein, germ and fibre.

"Some days it's awful, it's rancid, putrid," said Barrie Mayor Chris Carrier, talking about the smell that rolls out of Collingwood Ethanol. "When it's bad, it's really off-the-scale bad. You don't want to experience it, trust me."

St. Clair Township Mayor Steve Arnold said those complaints are what scared his council when Suncor first proposed building its plant in his community.

"When we were first approached, there was concern it would be like the plant in Chatham, which is very odorous; it's not people-friendly," he said referring to the Greenfield ethanol plant, which uses a wet mill process to produce ethanol, industrial alcohol and beverage alcohol.

St. Clair council received an 1,800-signature petition in opposition to the proposed Suncor plant, based largely on concerns about odour.

When council members expressed their hesitation, Suncor invited them to tour one of its other facilities and politicians changed their tune when they discovered the dry mill process resulted in virtually no odour beyond the actual site.

"Since it's been in operation, to my knowledge, council has had no complaints," the mayor said. "It's been a good addition to the municipality."

But he was quick to add that proper planning is key.

He has been following the debate in Oshawa and said he understands concerns about the proposed waterfront location.

"We try to keep as much public access as possible to our waterfront here," he said, stressing that the St. Clair River area, with its scenic views, pristine parks and residential areas, is several kilometres away from the ethanol plant.

He said the Township has been very methodical in its planning by creating an industrial corridor that includes a rail spur, industrial park and large developments like a Nova Chemicals complex -- and keeping new industrial developments like the ethanol plant confined to that land.

"In my point of view, that's where these places belong -- in an industrial area," the mayor said.