

## Getting burned

by Andrew Cash, Now Magazine

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### **Incineration contracts penalize cities that recycle too much of their garbage.**

Okay, I'll admit it, burning garbage, turning waste into thin air, has a certain allure - like time machines or personal flying rocketmobiles.

This magical vision, though, has so beguiled the McGuinty Liberals that the province has waived comprehensive environmental assessments for new "waste to energy" incinerators, thus encouraging municipalities to spend big dollars to burn their trash.

Trucking our garbage to Michigan landfills, on the other hand, always struck me as a bit sneaky. It has also spiked the fear that the GTA has run out of landfill for its current garbage, something which is utterly untrue, especially if we get serious about waste reduction.

But at a moment when enviros are vigilant about any iota of new toxins, and the public is astonishingly committed to reduce, reuse and recycle, suddenly pols are talking incineration again. It's breathtaking.

It's understandable that the province's powerful and vulturous waste management lobby is licking its chops over these developments (though it's less clear why editorial writers at the Toronto Star are falling over themselves in rapturous support for the government).

McGuinty's position has utterly confounded eco-activists who have been waiting for the preem's comprehensive green plan. Burning garbage has "taken us back to the 19th century," said toxicology expert and anti-incineration activist Dr. Paul Connett from upstate New York at a hastily called press conference last week at Queen's Park.

"It's so preposterous to talk about zero emissions," he said. "It's preposterous to ignore the whole issue of nano-particles, and it's preposterous to talk about job creation when the number created by an incinerator are minuscule compared to the number created through the alternatives."

Activists have been left wondering why McGuinty would go down the rocky road to science fiction in an election year, when environmental scrutiny has never been higher.

The answer may be Rod Bryden. Known to most Torontonians as the former owner of NHL rivals the Ottawa Senators, Bryden is a deep Liberal insider, the largest single donor to Dalton McGuinty's 1996 leadership campaign (\$10 grand), co-chair of Stéphane Dion's leadership transition team and the president of Plasco Energy Group. This is the company McGuinty referred to last week when he praised the idea of exporting Ontario incineration tech.

Plasco is putting the finishing touches on a \$31 million pilot project in Ottawa that, when fully operational in June, will take 85 tonnes of the city's garbage daily and turn it into synthetic gas to fuel electricity generators.

Bryden met with McGuinty once early in the planning process to gauge whether he would stand in the way of such a plan if bureaucrats at the Ministry of the Environment gave it the thumbs-

up. "There was no point in going through with this if the government was going to block it," he tells me from his office in Ottawa.

"If they'd said no, then I would have done this in another country." McGuinty didn't say no. Instead, a special environmental regulation was written to expedite the process.

One could look at the government's recent waiving of EAs as merely evening out the playing field for the other corporate interests not close to the premier, in as much as the first bypassing of an EA was done especially for Plasco's Ottawa pilot.

But Bryden doesn't think he got special treatment. After all, he says, his company is taking all the risks on the project and has had to meet rigorous provincial standards.

"The process we use to convert waste to synthetic gas creates no emissions," he says. "Many who are criticizing this haven't taken the time to understand what we are doing."

But the burning question around incineration, or gasification, of garbage may not turn on whether it is ultimately safe. "If you prove that it is safe, you ignore that it is stupid," thundered Connett at Queen's Park.

In other words, leaving aside the known toxic hazards of burning garbage (even Plasco admits on its website that during certain periods of malfunctioning equipment dioxin would be emitted into the atmosphere, though significantly less than the MOE standard), the question becomes, does incineration offer any advantage?

No, no, no, says Markham town councillor Erin Shapero. Surprise, surprise: Markham's 250,000 residents are among North American leaders in waste diversion. In the last two years, York Region's largest municipality diverted 70 per cent of its residential waste from landfill and expects to hit close to 95 per cent within the next few years. (By comparison, Toronto diverts about 40 per cent, with apartment buildings at the shockingly low rate of 13 per cent.)

Shapero says much of the 30 per cent that still goes to landfill right now consists of clothes, shoelaces and other textile material, bathroom organics and plastics. "Do we really want to be burning that?" she says.

Well, if York Region has its way, Markham may have to help feed a planned \$250 million incinerator. "Markham's heading for zero waste. We won't have anything to send it," says Shapero.

But "put or pay" stipulations in contracts would lock local governments into feeding incinerators or paying penalties if they became too good at waste reduction and didn't provide the minimum agreed-upon amount of garbage.

Bryden, who is quick to say he supports the principles of the three Rs, doesn't like to use the word "penalty" when referring to a municipality's waste stock obligations. If Plasco's two-year pilot yields good results, Bryden will be looking to build larger facilities. At that point, "we would require a 20-year commitment from any community that wished us to build, own and operate a commercial facility," he says.

NDP enviro critic Peter Tabuns remains skeptical. "I don't have confidence in McGuinty on the environment or in the government's ability to supervise and monitor these projects," he says.

Pointing to a waste-to-energy plant in Germany using similar technology to Plasco's that had to shut down permanently in 2004 due to technical problems, Tabuns says, "I don't think there's a magic box."