

Orono Times Editorial
July 15, 2009
orontimes@rogers.com

Green initiatives a wash

Environmentalists will be the first to tell you: just because something is labelled "green" doesn't mean it really does much for the environment.

In 2007, Clarington Council approved the creation of the Green Community Advisory Committee (GCAC). Its mandate is "to prepare a Green Community Strategy," and "undertake research in energy conservation and clean energy technologies" as well as to "organize educational events."

So far, it's hard to say that the GCAC has been effective. With no benchmarks to measure its progress, it is difficult to quantify its achievements. But judging from its largest undertaking so far, it does seem to have lost sight of its mandate.

GCAC is comprised of 13 volunteer members, including: the Mayor and one Member of Council (Mary Novak); seven representatives from various stakeholder groups such as Ontario Power Generation, and Veridian; and four members of the community at large.

Perhaps this is where it's gone wrong: a committee meant to focus on the broader community issues should consist mainly of community members. This committee has too many stakeholders with their own agendas. A prime example of this is GCAC's "Green Challenge," a 12-month incentive program to "encourage community participation in conserving energy and reducing waste." It ended in June. You may be forgiven if you didn't even realize the challenge was on, let alone over.

A series of 30 and 60 second commercials airing on CHEX/Channel 12 was supposed to inform us about the challenge and give us quarterly updates. Alas, if you were not a dedicated CHEX watcher, you probably missed these brief spots. The first one, a 60 second commercial, told us that over the first quarter we used 160,484,723 kilowatt hours of electricity in Clarington; and our curbside waste program collected 3,642 tonnes of dry waste, 447 tonnes of organics and 1,716 tonnes of blue box recycling.

The second quarter results were announced in a 30 second spot that told us we used 3.8% less electricity, produced 3% less garbage, and increased our recycling efforts by 4.7%. "Congratulations Clarington. That's awesome," we are told in a voiceover. Like the announcer, you may well ask, "So what does this mean?" The answer is a trite, "Keep on doing what you're doing and more of it!"

Why the results were deemed "successful" is a mystery, as no goals were set by which to measure them. Whether the results from the second quarter - differences of three or four percent -- were simply normal fluctuations in our garbage output, or a fantastic achievement, is anyone's guess. No results have ever been posted for the third and final quarters of the challenge. Council is also in the dark as to the

final results, as an update from GCAC was promised, but never given. Word is it may happen in September.

There was, however, a series of 30 second spots highlighting the achievements of GCAC's partners who sponsored the challenge, namely Ontario Power Generation, Waste Management, and Veridian. These commercials were clearly promoting the aforementioned companies and their own environmental programs. Yes, there was a green theme, but why promote the companies instead of GCAC's goals? Those companies have their own marketing budgets; sponsors are supposed to get some credit, but 30 second spots to blow their own horns? Clarington contributed \$16,500 towards the challenge, which was supposed to divide the community into areas to create "the players" for a competitive platform. Again, what the areas were was never explained. Perhaps due to stakeholder issues, and last year's power struggle over who should chair the committee, productivity has become a problem for GCAC. Over the course of 21 months, it has met only 10 times, with nine members - including the Mayor - listed as absent at least three times in a year.

While other municipalities have already implemented hybrid bus systems (Banff), green standard development practices (Toronto), energy-saving street lighting (Cobourg), and restrictions on the sale of bottled water (London, Toronto, St. John's, etc.), Clarington has yet to produce its Green Community Strategy, let alone communicate it and put it into action.

As the GCAC was instructed early on that the incineration issue was outside of its mandate, one wonders if it isn't just "green washing" the Municipality. The only way you could really call Clarington green is that Council should be green with envy over the environmental achievements of other municipalites.