

Commentary by Terry Voth

As you know, Durham Region recently decided to embark on the path of incineration for its waste management. This decision is, in my mind, a critical decision in terms of both the health and economic welfare of our region. However, in most of the editorials/columns I've read in the local papers, I am somewhat disappointed that I have not read any that have provided significant insight into the actual issues and arguments surrounding this project other than something at a very high level

(which are then sometimes accompanied by an opinion either for or against). As I'm sure you (or anyone that has tried to educate themselves on this topic) are aware, there is much that people should be made cognizant of in a number of areas that include health, economics, and the environment.

With that in mind, I would like to submit a viewpoint from a Durham citizen who has spent time to become at least somewhat knowledgeable about the facts in the brief time that I've been aware of this proposed project (I wish the region had done a lot more to make people aware of the project, and allow them the time and opportunity to educate themselves, voice their opinions and engage in the process).

I'm speaking as one who originally supported the incinerator for the same reasons that many 'lay people' cite. Specifically, it gets rid of the garbage without a messy landfill, and if it works in Europe, why not here? However, when I wanted to convince someone else of this viewpoint, I began to research the issue in depth. It was then that I changed my viewpoint. I attempted to contact my elected representatives (the Mayor and Regional Councillor) to open a dialogue and get their opinion on this very important issue. My messages were not responded to, so I was forced to take a

(valuable to me) vacation day and spent it at the June 16 Durham Council committee meeting to see for myself (and it was a very long day indeed!).

In listening to a number of proponents of the incinerator while educating myself, they almost invariably pose the issue as an "either-or" scenario: either an incinerator or a landfill. I feel this is wrong for a number of reasons:

- 1) Even with the incinerator, there is still a requirement for landfill. 20-30% of the waste by weight that goes into the incinerator will have to be landfilled (some of which is considered toxic and a health hazard and will require special handling). This is not "fear-mongering". It is fact, and Covanta (the contractor for the incinerator) acknowledges this (this is standard for any incinerator).

2) When the incinerator reaches full capacity which I'm sure it will (and which will result in importing waste from other regions), the total amount that has to be landfilled after incineration will be more than what Durham would have to landfill on its own now without any incinerator

(wasn't this project originally touted as a "Made in Durham" solution for Durham waste?). Again, this is not "fear-mongering", just simple math using numbers that both sides of the issue agree on.

3) Both incinerator and landfill-only solutions are wrong. They don't address the true problem, but rather only try to deal with it (by hiding it away). The solution is a reduction of waste to begin with, which is not a utopian fancy that incinerator proponents seem to try to make it out to be.

The details are too much to get into here, but succinctly, the *quarter of a billion dollars* being spent on this project could be more effectively spent on better recycling education and programs, as well as providing 'secondary separation' of recycling from the waste stream. This suddenly gets us close to a 70 or 80% of reduction of our waste stream, while generating many more jobs, and creating less remaining waste (which is 'clean') to landfill than will need to be land filled with the incinerator. As an aside, all of Durham's portion of the gas tax fund will be spent on this one project. Items such as public transit and roads will see no funding from our gas tax. And in the end, all this money will net us approx. 35 new permanent jobs after construction of the facility is complete.

Other arguments against the incinerator include a health perspective. Such as the health risk posed by ultra fine particulate matter (PM) released by incinerators

(they're even too small for the incinerator filters to effectively capture). I'd suggest that this risk is not "fear-mongering" when even the World Health Organization says there is no threshold found for PM below which no damage to health is observed. Items such as this, however, were not considered in the environmental assessment study. Covanta acknowledged at the council meeting that they're not perfect (nor would I expect them to be), but that testing of their emissions (which they concede is always performed with at least two weeks prior notice) passed 99.8 to 99.9% of the time (this is a combined statistic across approx 3600 performed tests). In most cases the emissions were rectified and retested positive within two or three weeks. But Covanta also stated that in no case that they're aware of have they ever stopped incineration. My only comment on this is: would you like to be living next to an incinerator during a period when a test failed but the incineration continued? Even if it only occurred once a year? Once every five years? Another aside: Doctors in both North America and Europe are lining up signing petitions against incineration (not just a few, but literally thousands... including 75 in Durham region alone).

I think the main point I'd like to get across is that the Region should not have voted yes; they should have deferred the decision for six months. They should then have made an honest attempt to get the people of Durham engaged in this critical decision. A six month delay would have no significant impact to our current waste

predicament, but rushing a 'Yes' now may result in irrevocable consequences (both economical and health-wise) that we'll not be able to back away from (perhaps we should learn a lesson from Detroit and its well documented incinerator disaster). Even from the money stand-point alone, don't we all deserve to have an opportunity to educate ourselves and then voice our opinions on an expense so large? Many of the people I've talked with didn't even know that an incinerator was being proposed. They never even had a chance to engage in the discussion and become involved in the process.

In my experience, I found accessing information from the Region extremely difficult – my elected representatives would not converse with me, and public sessions that I wanted to attend but couldn't weren't recorded and made available. However, at the regional council meeting last Tuesday, a theme that came up multiple times among opposing delegations was the willingness to put this matter to a public vote, the underlying assumption being the time to allow people the opportunity to become aware, educated, and then let them decide. I think this in itself says much about how this issue has been handled on both sides.

Thank you for taking the time to read my comments.

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<http://www.stadamdesign.com/cosmos/Backissues/Cosmos%20July%201609/cosjuly1609%204.pdf>