

November 16, 2011

Editorial

Souvenir shovels infra dig

The report in the *Toronto Star* on how much the Region of Durham spent on the ground breaking ceremony for the incinerator, published on November 3rd really touched a nerve with many Region residents.

Through a freedom of information request, *Toronto Star* reporter Carola Vyhnak found out that the Region's August 17th ground breaking ceremony for the new garbage incinerator in Courtice cost taxpayers \$75,000.

Here at The Times, we made inquiries to the Region in August, right after the ground breaking event, asking what the cost was, and were told that those costs were not available. When we asked what the budget was for the event, we were told that information was also not available.

Ratepayers have every reason to be incensed that their government saw fit to throw a lavish ground breaking event, and thought they could get away with not disclosing the cost. Given the controversy surrounding this incinerator project, the sensible thing would have been to forego the ceremony or hold a very simple one. Building the first new garbage incinerator in Ontario in 22 years is not a milestone worth celebrating. That the Region has decided to burn 140,000 tonnes of garbage a year, rather than adopt more progressive waste management options, is a huge step backwards, a decision they should be ashamed of rather than celebrating.

The invitation-only party for 175 guests complete with luxury port-a-potties, air conditioned tents, jumbo shrimp and sushi for lunch and mini souvenir shovels to take home was clearly an opportunity for Regional Chair Roger Anderson to poke the anti-incinerator lobby group in the eye. The guest list was made up of senior regional staff past and present from York and Durham, past and present council members from both regions, representatives from Covanta - the U.S. firm hired to design, build and operate the facility - the consulting firm hired by the Region to get them through the environmental assessment process, and the lone vocal incinerator supporter from Clarington, Katherine McKeever and her husband.

The ground breaking ceremony was a victory celebration for Regional Chair Roger Anderson, who was unquestionably the incinerator's biggest cheerleader. We the taxpayer paid \$428 for each of the invited guests to spend an hour patting each other on the back, wolfing down a few snacks and then sneak out the

back entrance so they wouldn't be inconvenienced by the protestors/taxpayers who were footing the bill. If the ground breaking for the incinerator was truly a celebration, it would have been open to everyone to attend.

Those ratepayers who spent upwards of five years fighting the incinerator requested the Region hold a public information session on the proposed facility back in 2009 before the environmental assessment received final approval. Their request was denied because of the cost, which was quoted as being \$40,000. Incinerator opponents repeatedly requested additional emissions monitoring, and again they were denied because of the cost.

For the Region to have turned around and put on such a lavish event for a ground breaking ceremony is inexcusable.

The Regional Chair can act with impunity because he is not elected by the Regional taxpayers.

Last November, we at *The Times* tried to contact Chair Anderson to ask if he was going to sign the Covanta contract before the new council was sworn in. The Province gave notice of its approval of the incinerator on November 19, 2010. This was after the municipal election and before the new council (many of whom campaigned on an anti-incinerator platform) were sworn in. Pressure was put on Anderson to hold off signing the contract with Covanta until the new council had been sworn in, there being the possibility the majority opinion of the new council would be to not proceed with building the incinerator.

Anderson signed the Covanta contract on November 23rd, two weeks before the new council was sworn in.

We at *The Times* made several attempts to contact Anderson, to ask him why he signed it. Chair Anderson made no attempt to return our calls and emails and explain his actions.

On December 8, 2010, Anderson was elected by a large majority of Regional council members to his fifth term as Regional Chair. If Anderson had to go to the Durham Region electorate every four years, there is no doubt he would spend more time being accountable to the electorate for his actions. There certainly would not have been a lavish victory celebration for a project that had very little public support.