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Opinion

by Doug Anderson, President, DurhamCLEAR

If not incineration — then what?

The powers-that-be at Durham Region would like you to believe that the only alternative to the incinerator is landfill, and because the Region decided long ago it doesn't want any more landfills, the incinerator becomes a necessity.

That's what they want you to believe - and to make the incinerator a reality they have studiously steered the discussion away from what is a very real and achievable alternative: aggressive diversion (reuse and recycling) leading to near-zero waste.

When Durham started the incinerator EA, it had a diversion rate of 36%, but with the introduction of the green bin, diversion jumped to 49% in only two years. That's typical of how Durham citizens have responded to efforts to increase recycling — give them the opportunity and they step up to the plate. Durham Region led the province in recycling for a number of years.

However since 2007, there have been very few new initiatives and the diversion percentage remains pretty stagnant in the low 50s. Durham says it wants to achieve 70% by the time the incinerator begins operation. But if you crunch the numbers in the business case prepared for the Region (Deloitte, 2008), you realize that that wouldn't leave enough residual waste to provide the 100,000 tonnes it has contracted to supply to feed the burner.

Instead they will achieve 70% in about 2021 and congratulate themselves for the achievement. Meanwhile San Francisco, which has a similar population to Durham, will have achieved zero-waste or very close to it. Other jurisdictions will be close behind.

We could too. The challenge is to change the mindset.

There is no such thing as garbage per se. Goods you bought a week ago are still all identifiable and separable. Everything in your household garbage IS being recycled somewhere. The challenge is to find the best ways to separate them and to find the markets that will process them.

Durham Region has a plan to achieve 70% which was drafted by Golder Associates in 2009. It includes relatively minor adjustments such as revised schedules, new bins, more promotion and the recycling of a few additional plastics including film plastic and also mattress recycling. The total capital cost of these is estimated at \$7.5 million and annual operating cost at \$5.9 million. Compare that with the 272 million that the Region intends to spend on the incinerator.

What is missing from the Golder plan is specific plans to capture compostables that are still going to landfill (15%) and Bluebox materials (6%). Adding these items alone would put our current diversion rate well past 70%.

Other areas where our recycling is sub-par are electronics and hazardous waste.

Golder estimates that the Region's electronics recycling program is capturing less than 3% of the total. Also, a battery recycler has told me privately that only about 1% of batteries are getting recycled. The rest goes to landfill. Durham wants to burn them. Batteries contain mercury, lead, cadmium and nasties which will contribute to the toxic emissions from the incinerator.

While new bins and schedules may help collect some of this, the biggest problem is that fraction of the population that can't be bothered. These people are sponging off the rest of us and need to be brought into line with new incentives, penalties and enforcement. Many municipalities charge per bag for residual waste. If people who regularly put out 4 bags a week were charged \$5 per bag, I think they would recognize the economic benefits of recycling.

Beyond this there are a few small fractions of our garbage, such as pet waste, carpeting and diapers which present specific challenges, but these are being overcome in other jurisdictions where they are being recycled.

Wouldn't it be better to see our waste being recycled into new items of equal or greater value than seeing them turned into ashes and air pollution?

We can achieve waste reduction faster and cheaper without incineration, AND preserve our scarce natural resources in the process.