

MUNICIPAL WASTE

City proves owning its own landfill is not a waste of money



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City council barely noticed yesterday when staff asked it to pour even more millions into its lifesaving Green Lane landfill in Southwestern Ontario - this time to buy up all the farms surrounding the operation and convert them into impregnable "buffer lands."

If it wasn't for Councillor Rob Ford's irrefragable need to spout at every interval, there wouldn't even have been a debate. But he insisted, and the vote went 30-1.

It was no great triumph - a mere \$7-million add-on to a \$220-million done deal. But like much of the city's solid-waste policy since the near-disaster of the Adams Mine proposal, it was smart - cheap insurance against repetition of the tragedy of Vaughan, in which suburban sprawl destroyed a perfectly good, city-owned landfill right nearby.

That won't happen at Green Lane. Nor will any borders close. Properly managed, it could serve the city's need for generations while returning a profit by processing other communities' waste. No leases, long-term contracts or minimum tonnages encumber its operation. The place is pure gold, and almost everybody knows that by now.

While cities and regions throughout Ontario and Canada rush to embrace incineration, anticipating enormous increases in the cost of land-filling, Toronto has driven its disposal costs to rock bottom.

The cost of shipping trash to Michigan is almost \$70 a tonne - a sweetheart deal, but politically troublesome. At Green Lane, Toronto is paying the equivalent of \$20 a tonne just to amortize the cost of acquisition, according to city solid-waste czar Geoff Rathbone. But even including that, the total cost of shipping waste to Green Lane is still less than \$50 a tonne.

For Toronto, Green Lane has provided the policy stability and fiscal elbow room needed to roll out world-beating waste-diversion programs. Even the much-reviled monster blue bins are a smashing success, according to Mr. Rathbone, responsible for sharp increases in diversion rates in neighbourhoods where they have been used longest.

For the rest of the country, the Toronto policy is unassailable proof that no new technology will ever beat owning your own landfill. In fact, landfill is the new technology, with the old dumps of the past quickly turning into sophisticated recycling and composting operations capable of conserving and producing significant amounts of energy.

In response to clear market reality that violates so many "new technology" assertions, the incinerator lobby is now spreading word that the cost of fuel for garbage-hauling trucks will soon drive the cost of land-filling out of sight. The best evidence they have is an estimate

prepared by consultant Deloitte for Durham Region, which forecasts that landfill haulage costs will more than double over the next 20 years.

So what? They would have to quadruple to make local incineration more attractive than land-filling down the road. And in 20 years time, when other municipalities are still stuck with millstone contracts requiring them to burn trash at vast expense, Toronto garbage trucks will be running on cellulosic ethanol made from yard waste at Green Lane.

That's what the buffer lands are all about. In addition to insulating the landfill from incompatible land uses, they provide room to expand the operation with recycling, composting or energy-producing facilities.

The city currently pays benefits to local communities, including a native band, based on how many tonnes it disposes. When disposal rates drop and diversion picks up, as planned, the same groups will get a cut from every tonne processed in a new, on-site diversion facility.

It's so clever. All the incentives are lined up just so and everybody's willing to do the right thing. Unsurprisingly, that is exactly what's happening.