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No inquiry for 75k party

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In a close vote, Regional Council opted not to launch an internal inquiry into the \$75,000 spent on the energy from waste facility ground breaking held in Courtice on August 17th of this year.

In a recorded vote, 13 of the 24 regional councillors present at last Wednesday's Regional council meeting voted against the inquiry. Clarington councillors Mayor Adrian Foster and Mary Novak voted against launching an inquiry, Councillor Willie Woo voted in favour.

The cost of the official ground breaking ceremony was made public in a November 7th Toronto Star article by a reporter who through filing a Freedom of Information Request found out what the costs of the ceremony were.

"To the people of Durham, I'm sorry you didn't like the extravagance," Region Chair Roger Anderson stated at last Wednesday's Regional council meeting, after admitting the decisions for the groundbreaking ceremony, "rests in my office."

Chair Anderson revealed the cost to Durham Region taxpayers for the groundbreaking ceremony was \$24,000 of the \$75,000, York Region was responsible for a portion as was Covanta, the U.S. based company contracted by the Region to design, build and operate garbage incinerator.

"Should we have paid \$35,000 or \$36,000 for some tents just because maybe the prime minister might show up? I guess not," Anderson stated. He however said he would not apologize for the food, the speakers, or the furniture, "and I certainly won't apologize for having handicapped parking," Anderson stated. According to documents released through the freedom of information request, the air conditioned tents cost \$28,000, the food \$11,000 and furniture for the event cost \$12,000. There were also take-away gifts for the 175 invited guests of stamped chocolates which cost \$1,500 and souvenir mini shovels which cost \$5,100.

"My residents and I are appalled at the lack of sensitivity and the extravagance of an event for the invited few," stated Clarington Regional Councillor Willie Woo. He said he would support the call for an inquiry into the cost of the event because he along with many residents of Clarington and the Region would like to know how the cost of the ceremony ballooned to the price it did.

Mayor Adrian Foster told fellow Regional Councillors they had no idea how damaging and difficult this whole issue has been for Clarington Councillors.

At last Monday's Clarington Council Meeting, Councillor Ron Hooper asked the three Regional councillors to let their colleagues know how angry the public are about the expense of the groundbreaking ceremony. Clarington councillors are doing clean-up duty in regards to the ceremony, according to Hooper. "We are left to clean up the mess," he stated. "It was way over the top as far as I'm concerned, and the people out there are not happy," Hooper said.

Foster said he would not support the motion for an inquiry without an amendment requesting staff to create policies and procedures for future groundbreaking ceremonies.

According to the Region's Finance Commissioner, Jim Clapp, the budget for the groundbreaking ceremony was in the overall EFW budget approved by councillors in 2009.

"This is the biggest project we have done in years," stated Anderson. "It is going to be recognized by people around Canada, the U.S. and Europe, it is that simple. So I apologize but his inquiry is not needed.

Oshawa Councillor Nancy Diamond said she would support the motion as it was a matter of accountability, not a pro or anti incineration issue. "People understand this was an unnecessary party that cost a lot of money and they want us to tell them how did this happen and is it going to happen again," she stated. Diamond wanted to know what the real cost for policing was. The freedom of information documents showed the Region paid \$3,000 for two police officers to be on site the night before the ceremony and two officers during the day and two cruisers each time. Diamond said she could not attend the ceremony but on the televised news reports she could see there were a lot more than two police officers on site during the ceremony. "How many police officers and at what real cost," she asked. "You don't get that kind of police coverage for \$3,000."

It was estimated there were over 30 police on site to deal with demonstrators at the gate.

Anderson confirmed the Region only hired four officers and there wouldn't have been any additional officers required had there been no anticipation of trouble. "We wouldn't have had any other police officers there except for some [former] council members and public who thought they could attend a function they were not invited to," he stated. Police were copied on all emails regarding the ground breaking, according to Anderson, and they did what they do when there is a potential problem, "They show up," he stated.

While the motion by Pickering Councillor Jennifer O'Connell and John Neal of Oshawa for an inquiry - into the cost of the ground breaking ceremony, where the funds came from, who authorized the spending and what the actual cost was (including the costs for police services) - did not pass, staff were directed to develop a policy for future such ceremonies and report back to council.

The ground breaking ceremony was held on the site for the future Durham/York EFW at 72 Osbourne Road Courtice.