

## Why incineration is now a burning issue

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One of the main reasons our suburban and rural neighbours are pushing so hard to build garbage incinerators is "the general public's growing opposition to landfill," according to the proponents of one huge new "thermal treatment facility" on the shore of Lake Ontario, east of Toronto. Their technical experts are so confident about this aversion that they have built it into their business case, assuming that public opposition to landfilling, combined with a tightening border, will quickly eliminate the burial option's significant cost advantage.

Last year, they did surveys that told them the citizens of York and Durham regions, which are partnered in the new scheme, favoured incineration over landfill. Local politicians trumpeted its benefits, contrasting their progressive approach to the paralysis that then prevailed in Toronto, which resisted incineration and remained locked into an increasingly vulnerable long-haul contract with a Michigan landfill.

Their experts were slightly foxier, warning that firm cost estimates of the project were impossible to determine and that "they could change significantly if the underlying assumptions are less favourable."

But that is exactly what happened: Defying the assumptions, Toronto secured a large landfill in Southern Ontario at a highly attractive price. With the Green Lane purchase, the city gained long-term disposal capacity while ensuring the new facility will pay for itself. Rather than going up, landfill costs fell. Rather than becoming equal, the cost of landfilling is holding steady at one-third to one-half the cost of incineration - not including the quarter-billion-dollar cost of the plant and the inevitable overruns that will attend its construction.

Even before the hard part of the job begins - finding a willing host for the new plant - the economics of the new incinerator are shot. Despite its deceptive characterization as an "energy-from-waste facility," potential revenues from power generation can't come close to saving it. They're barely a frill.

Why would anybody favour a project that will cost orders of magnitude more than a readily available alternative while, at the same time, creating extra environmental risks? Green Lane sets a benchmark that cannot be ignored, as the politicians will discover when they try to site the new incinerator.

Not long ago, Mayor Jim Abernethy of Clarington, a municipality east of Oshawa, summed up popular feeling when he described incineration as "imperative" for York and Durham. Now that the regions have jointly identified his town's waterfront as the likeliest site for the new plant, he is shifting as fast as his constituents, demanding "more information" and "due diligence."

As some angry constituents have pointed out, he should have considered all that before advertising for an incinerator. But there is little doubt local politicians will be forced to turn and fight hard against it. Environmental groups are busy organizing a campaign, and every passing week lends more weight to their objections, steadily eroding the "underlying assumptions" that once made incineration seem like a good idea.

As with all these decisions, cost will rule at the end of the day - and the basic rate for disposing of large amounts of garbage in Southern Ontario is now pegged far south of \$100 a tonne. In that light, winning consent to build a \$250-million incinerator that will cost \$150 a tonne to operate - according to the most optimistic, untested calculations - hardly seems smart. But spending money to prove that fact, once and for all, is a public service for which we should thank outlying ratepayers.

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