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The burning question: Why do it? Globe & Mail

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The politicians who plan to despoil the north shore of Lake Ontario with a mass-burn garbage incinerator might think twice when they hear the latest news from the other side of the lake, in Hamilton and Niagara, where their counterparts just slammed the brakes on an identical project.

It's hard to imagine the Niagara incinerator being built after the latest cost analysis, prepared by independent consultants and released this week. They show that our cross-lake neighbours stand to save \$100-million over the next quarter-century simply by deciding not to build the thing - with zero risk of a garbage crisis as a result.

Cost of easily sustainable status quo till 2028, according to consultants hired to study the question: \$171-million. Cost of incineration over same period, taking full account of potential revenues gained by concomitant energy production: \$273-million. Cost of the political agony of finding a place to build such a patently unnecessary facility, plus ongoing costs to the environment and public health of operating it: priceless - so far.

The Niagara report is the first to acknowledge the fast-changing reality in Ontario today: Suddenly, there is an ample amount of space available for municipal waste in clean, modern landfills.

Collectively, they present a far cheaper, less problematic and much greener alternative to any of the so-called thermal treatments currently available for large-scale use. In Niagara's case, the great shift came when Queen's Park approved the significant expansion of a large local landfill. But the phenomenon is occurring across the province.

Just as the acquisition of the Green Lane landfill ended Toronto's incineration debate, provincial approval for expansion of the Walker landfill in Niagara is killing that region's unborn burner.

The pattern is now clear: While local and regional governments fret about disappearing landfill space and flirt naively with incineration, the province has quietly conjured into existence enough new landfill capacity to swallow another 125 million tonnes of soiled diapers and Styrofoam - approximately enough to accommodate the total municipal waste of Africa until the second coming of Ras Tafari.

The Niagara experience not only demonstrates the new reality of inciner-omics, it sharply contradicts trendy beliefs that the technology, currently euphemized as "waste-to-energy," has somehow become clean and green since the days when a more sensible generation banned it. Without even considering the bugbear of dioxin, industry data gleaned from the environmental assessment of the proposed Niagara facility show that making power from Ontario garbage will be far dirtier and more dangerous than making power from coal - the dirtiest fuel in current use.

The shocking emissions profiles of these facilities are illustrated in an upcoming cover article in Solid Waste Magazine (currently available under "posted documents" at solidwastemag.com) by Peterborough consultant Clarissa Morawski.

The most promising of the new thermal treatments, called gasification, emits almost five times more carbon dioxide than the most efficient form of natural gas generation. State-of-the-art waste incineration emits almost 50 per cent more CO₂, in terms of grams per unit of energy produced, than burning coal.

But that's just the beginning. According to data submitted to regional officials by incinerator makers themselves, their products emit five times the mercury of coal burners - 35 times the amount emitted by natural-gas turbines! Gasification is slightly better, but still way worse than the dirtiest existing fuel. The same is true for hundreds of other toxic substances, according to Ms. Morawski. "It's not like these are my stats or Greenpeace's stats," she said in an interview. "These are the numbers that have been submitted by the manufacturers of incinerators. So I would suggest they probably represent a best-case scenario."

Examining the Niagara data, Ms. Morawski said she was struck that the McGuinty government, which has risked so much political capital on a large-scale phase-out of coal, would simultaneously encourage an alternative that is far dirtier.

"I was absolutely shocked that incineration is still under consideration, given the pollution profile alone," she said. "Not only is it polluting (less so than it was 10 years ago, absolutely) but it is extremely expensive."

If honesty were the best policy, the Niagara story would be enough to kill all current plans for large-scale "thermal treatment" of municipal waste in Ontario. But there are also positive lessons from the peninsula: Under a progressive new director of waste management, Niagara is beginning to promote the modern technology of "stabilized landfill," in which only materials that cannot be digested or recycled are buried.

The technology is superior to conventional practice but still cheaper and more flexible than thermal treatment, according to Niagara waste boss Barry Friesen, who helped to create Canada's first stabilized landfill in Halifax after local protests ruled out both incineration and conventional landfilling.

Beginning with such techniques as methane-gas collection, a climate-friendly innovation Toronto pioneered more than a decade ago, landfill technology is advancing as fast or faster than incineration, which still can't match it in price or performance - let alone replace it.

Will all this be enough to save the last of the true believers, in York and Durham, from themselves? If not, a giant Toronto-based protest - something that would seem inevitable in the circumstances - should do it.

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