

Legal smoke and mirrors fuel trash-burning trend

JOHN BARBER

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If not cruel, it was a mischievous fate that awarded David Miller's Toronto with the pot of gold - a self-financing, city-owned landfill - while simultaneously arranging to ring the city with giant smokestacks pouring the chemical remains of human garbage, along with a rogue's gallery of dangerous compounds created in the process of incineration, into the air we all breathe.

Spurred by a provincial government that has scandalously exempted new incinerators from the Environmental Assessment Act, outlying municipalities are now racing to build three large facilities in the region. For better or worse, the process seems unstoppable.

Last month, Hamilton officials warned that incineration will cost \$100-million more than the city needs to pay for waste disposal in the foreseeable future, given the large capacity of existing local landfills. But political incentives cut across common sense: Yesterday, the city's public works committee formally requested the province exempt its imminent incinerator from a full environmental assessment.

At a time when municipalities can't replace streetcar tracks without pouring years of effort and millions of dollars into environmental assessments, the McGuinty government's incinerator exemption could be the most corrupt public policy in Ontario.

It emerged this spring in the form of a regulation for the Environmental Assessment Act, stating that new incinerators could undergo an "environmental screening process" instead of a full assessment.

One key difference is that the shortcut frees proponents from the need to test their technology against alternatives. More important, it saves time. Hamilton officials estimated they could begin building their new burner as early as this fall with the help of the new screening process.

Want to build streetcar tracks on Jane Street? The waiting time for provincial approval will be two years, minimum. Want to build an incinerator on Jane Street? The rubber stamp will come down in 90 days.

The supposed catch is that you only get to take the shortcut if you promise to attach a boiler to your burner and make a nominal amount of electricity, raising it to the exalted status of a "waste-to-energy facility." Considering that this is the only form of large-scale, mass-burn waste incinerator currently on offer in Ontario, the club is not exclusive. And thanks to the soon-to-be-truncated assessment of the Hamilton-Niagara facility, we now know that burning garbage is the stupidest imaginable way to make electricity.

Data submitted by the manufacturers themselves show their state-of-the-art "waste-to-energy facilities" to be far more polluting, in almost every measure, than

power plants fired by coal. The same government that is shutting coal-fired generators because they are too polluting is actively encouraging municipalities to build garbage-fired generators that make coal look good.

Such are the inconvenient truths that emerge from environmental assessments. No wonder Queen's Park wants to do away with them. In the meantime, the energy component of such facilities remains no more than a sooty fig leaf disguising a basic lust to burn garbage.

Proponents complain it is unfair to compare thermal waste-disposal facilities with power stations that use clean fuels to generate electricity. But they are no more willing to see their darlings compared with modern landfills that have superior emissions profiles. In that light, they go back to promoting the benefits of energy from waste.

Now they are attempting outright censorship, gleefully accepting provincial permission not to tell the whole truth about their plans - and thus avoiding the appearance of more inconvenient contradictions in their rush to spend hundreds of millions of dollars befouling the air for no compelling reason.

jbarber@globeandmail.com