

The evidence is in: Halton's incinerator folly is toast

JOHN BARBER - Globe & Mail

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Once again, on behalf of all Torontonians, allow me to extend sincere gratitude to the suburban municipalities now flirting seriously with incineration and similar "thermal treatments" of household wastes. Every step forward they take reconfirms the folly of their path.

But the department headed by Bob Nosal, medical officer of health for Halton Region, deserves special credit for offering the most important public service so far: a scarlet-red flag warning the easily deceived that building any such device, despite prevailing happy talk about "acceptable" levels of pollution, will hurt people - or, to use the phrase preferred by Halton bureaucrats, "be associated with some increase in adverse health impacts."

Until now, the folly of incineration has emerged in the form of inconvenient truths popping out of the environmental assessments of impending new incinerators in Durham and Niagara - hard evidence about emissions, costs and alternatives to replace the easy assurances heard earlier on the sales floor.

Dr. Nosal's intervention is the first rebellion to emerge from within the ranks of the promoters.

It takes the benign form of a peer review of "Step 4a" of the region's plan to build an incinerator, in which it purported to identify and describe the prospective facility's "potential health and environmental effects." Written by medical scientist David Pengelly, recent recipient of a City of Toronto Green award for his work on air quality, the review gently but thoroughly demolishes official assurances that modern incinerators are benign.

"I'm a scientist," Dr. Pengelly said in an interview. "I'm not convinced by assertions, I'm convinced by evidence." The Halton report, he added, offered no evidence to support the contention that modern incinerators, despite being cleaner than their predecessors, are in fact safe. They emit the same dangerous pollutants as earlier incinerators, albeit less of them. But how much is that? Step 4a doesn't say.

"I'm prepared to accept that things are better than they were," he said. "My problem was that there wasn't very specific scientific evidence brought out to show how much better they are."

Dr. Nosal, the official who commissioned the review, is already advocating strict abatement of existing pollution in Halton's already "taxed" airshed - a position unlikely to herald approval of new sources of dangerous pollution. He and his crew deserve "a great deal of credit for taking an active role in making sure that these health issues are addressed right from the very beginning," Dr. Pengelly said. "I can tell you that's not happening in other municipalities."

Leaving aside its welcome exposé of incineration's health hazards, the Halton report includes more than enough latent ammunition to destroy any hope a burner might soon be built there. The idea is absurd on its face: Halton's existing landfill is big enough to last until 2030, long before which it could easily be expanded to take garbage until the last person alive today is gone.

Mercifully, the bureaucrats have abandoned their nutty idea that Halton should "take a leadership role" by building a giant incinerator to compete with facilities throughout the province. Unlike some of their colleagues elsewhere, they acknowledge that recent developments - especially the sudden appearance of 50 million tonnes of new landfill

capacity in Southern Ontario - have destroyed the viability of such schemes. Faced with the disappointing fact that Halton has no need for an incinerator, they are reduced to recommending a teeny tiny one.

This ongoing retreat is a fascinating event for which suburban taxpayers - and everybody who breathes - should be grateful.

Stripped of its rationale, its hazards exposed, the current push to incinerate is revealed as a kind of infrastructure adventurism, led by a tunnel-visioned cadre of engineers and consultants, that can be brought to a halt with no negative consequences.

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