

# Getting burned

June 08, 2006

by Gord Perks, Eye Weekly



Welcome to the new, match-happy Ontario, where burning our problems away is suddenly chic:

- Waste management consultants working for York Region are expected to put a garbage incineration proposal in front of York Council any day.
- Citizens in Brampton are valiantly fighting a loopy plan to burn "low-level" radioactive wastes.
- An eastern Ontario cement kiln has asked for a licence to burn used tires, animal waste, pelletized garbage and some plastics from Canada and a number of American states. The minister of the environment has refused demands for an environmental assessment.
- Every few weeks, the province of Ontario grants a licence to burn spent motor oil as a heating fuel.
- A northern copper smelter is vying to burn shredded electronic wastes such as computers, photocopiers and TVs.
- Ottawa and Southgate Township are both toying with playing host to pilot programs for experimental incineration plants.
- A proposal to burn Toronto's sewage is proving harder to kill than Dracula.

It wasn't always this way. A dozen years ago, then-environment minister Ruth Grier issued a ban on burning garbage. Plans to force tire recycling and motor oil reuse were afoot. A program was being developed to phase out the use of hazardous chemicals, leaving less to dump and burn. You might recognize these strategies. They are all examples of what was once the most commonly held bit of environmental wisdom: reduce, reuse and recycle, and if there's anything left over, make damn sure the pollutants don't get dispersed into the environment.

What went wrong? It could be Michigan panic. Every few weeks, the almost-closed border creates a frenzy of demands that Toronto get cracking and build some incinerators. Mayoral candidate Jane Pitfield seems eager to play this card in the lead-up to November's election. But Toronto trash has created this same panic for decades. Every single proposal

has been just as fraught as the current system.

New, darker forces are at work. First, as landfill prices climb (they're nearly 10 times what they were in the late '80s), the profit margins for burn-merchants climb, too. Given projected volumes and prices, a standard 20-year contract to incinerate garbage would be worth \$1.5 billion. Small wonder a whole army of firms ranging from small start-ups to multinational garbage giants are sniffing around Ontario, making exaggerated claims about what their new magic flame technologies can do.

Climbing energy prices are drawing other players into the game. Many fuel-intensive industries are offering to burn unwanted wastes. "Give me your garbage as a fuel and I'll stop burning coal/oil/natural gas," they say. Supposedly, this has something to do with reducing climate change. Hogwash. The only independent research I've seen says that burning garbage creates more climate pollution per watt of energy produced. The only thing reduced here is the millions spent on fuel.

Another interesting development comes from the manufacturers of consumer products. More than ever before, they are pushing incineration. Why? Increasingly, governments are looking for ways to make them pay for recycling their products. In some cases, that could be very expensive. Getting you and I to put up tax dollars to build incinerators is free.

What do these factors have in common? Profit, profit and profit, which isn't a strong sales point, so other arguments are used. Some proponents claim they can eliminate all emissions, which is just a bald-faced lie. Less excitable boosters point to widespread approval in Europe -- forgetting to mention Europe's huge public protests against incineration. An anti-incineration petition drive in Bavaria, Germany collected one million signatures in 12 days. Last time I looked, France's anti-incineration coalition boasted over 100 citizen groups. English environmentalists are opposing incinerators hammer and tongs. Nothing can stop incinerators from spewing CO<sub>2</sub>, smog precursors, toxic heavy metals and other pollutants. Incinerators will always work on the same basic principle: garbage in, garbage out. The only thing that's really changed is the amount of profit they can generate.

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