

Whoosh! Grand incinerator plans go up in smoke

JOHN BARBER - Globe & Mail

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Last week, all the regional governments surrounding Toronto were quietly, almost imperceptibly backing away from their grand schemes to "demonstrate leadership" by burning their garbage in allegedly high-tech incinerators. Today they're running, their tiptoe retreat becoming a heel-flashing rout.

First to bolt was York Region, which formally abandoned a long-established partnership with its neighbour, Durham, to build and operate a \$250-million mass-burn incinerator on an equal basis.

Instead of paying for half the facility and agreeing to use half its capacity, York has proposed instead to contribute 12 per cent of the cost of building a Durham-owned burner - and to reduce its obligation to stoke the thing accordingly. Meaning it will never be built.

Yesterday, Halton Region outpaced York when its planning committee, led by new regional chair Gary Carr, voted unanimously and definitively to cancel its once-grandiose plan to build a large incinerator to burn garbage from across Greater Toronto. Halton saw red flags everywhere and responded promptly with a white one.

Today, officials on the other side of the lake are meeting to formalize the divorce of another two regional partners -- Hamilton and Niagara -- who until recently have been happily planning to build a burner together.

Niagara was actually the first of all the regions to recognize the folly of incineration and to change course. Its desertion means that Hamilton, like Durham, is now on its own with a project that just became hundreds of millions of dollars more expensive and far riskier than it first appeared.

The risk factor alone is unmanageable. If nobody can guarantee a supply of burnable garbage - or agree to pay penalties when there's not enough of it to keep the fires lit - nobody will build an incinerator. The United States is crowded with jurisdictions that signed "put-or-pay" contracts to encourage the construction of unnecessary incinerators - and paid handsomely when there wasn't enough garbage to put.

The fear of not being able to "turn off the tap" at a garbage-hungry burner is one reason why Niagara has changed direction, according to regional waste management director Barry Friesen.

"The public has been sold that this is a silver bullet to solve the waste problem," Mr. Friesen said. But it's nothing close to that, he added, emphasizing that incinerators worldwide act as barriers to future waste diversion.

While not formally abandoning Hamilton, Niagara has decided to let someone else take the first shot.

Halton cancelled its plans for the same reasons, according to Mr. Carr, with local public-health authorities intervening effectively. The region has enough landfill capacity to last decades, he said, and it made little sense to commit for decades to a hazardous technology that is said to be rapidly evolving.

"This is a new administration, a new chair and a new council with a whole different attitude to it," Mr. Carr said. Yesterday, they proved it dramatically - demonstrating leadership by deciding unanimously not to build an incinerator.

In truth - and as always in such affairs - it is Toronto that led the fight and deserves most plaudits for the sudden, surprise victory.

As long as Toronto had no place to put its garbage, its refusal to incinerate was considered backward by the suburban smart set who thought they knew a thing or three about modern technology and "acceptable" levels of air pollution. But that smugness evaporated when Toronto acquired its own profitable landfill - and so did the market for potentially burnable Toronto garbage.

It may take a few more months for the last stragglers to depart the late field of battle, but the result is unquestionable. Abandoning their hidebound ideas and irrational prejudices, local politicians throughout Greater Toronto are leading the way on a better path.