

Toronto Sun

Refinery plans fuel furor

Oshawa residents fear ethanol facility would scar waterfront

By IAN ROBERTSON, SUN MEDIA

July 28, 2007

OSHAWA -- Lovers of this city's only lakeside beach, wildlife marshes and nature walks fear developers will soon disrupt their shoreline with a "green" fuel refinery and a paved parking lot.

Ajax businessman Dan O'Connor's plans for a \$185-million corn-based ethanol plant with 50 staff near the harbour is brewing into another round of faceoffs by residents, politicians, environmentalists and the Oshawa Harbour Commission (OHC).

With the federal government wanting to sell off west harbour land, plans are underway for condos, small businesses and other homes, but the OHC wants more revenue-producing firms on the eastern property, its CEO and harbourmaster, Donna Taylor, said.

"We have been talking to Mr. O'Connor about an offer to lease, so that he can move forward to the city for the appropriate approvals," she said, adding his proposal "is not completely in accordance with zoning.

"We are in the business of running a profitable port, so we are attracting bonafide port users and that's why we looked at the ethanol plant," Taylor said, stressing the new industry will produce jobs.

Deputy Mayor Brian Nicholson, a former harbour commission member for the city, cried foul over its secret talks with O'Connor, which Taylor defended as a necessary part of business.

"We have an open mind and we're willing to hear what they have to say," said Nicholson, adding the plant would be "an oil refinery, just not coming from oil in the ground.

"We haven't even seen an application," he said. "Why don't they sit down and meet with us, even in-camera ... we've been known to keep confidentiality.

The plant could go on city industrial land near freeways and rail lines, he said.

Nicholson disputed OHC predictions of a dock expansion to accommodate ocean-going freighters bringing corn and shipping ethanol, "since the federal and provincial governments and the city said no three times already."

He said the city is also going to court to block a proposed harbour railway spur line.

On the waterfront, residents were left aghast by the rumours.

"They should leave it," Sandra Thiele, 36, said on a regular visit to Lakeview Park Beach with her sandcastle-building son Gwyndon, 8. "It's the only beach in Oshawa.

"They shouldn't be bringing in any factories," the mom said. "I can't afford a cottage, so this is my cottage."

Robert Bulins, 68, one of many fishermen who uses the pier, said, "you meet some real nice people," proudly showing fellow fisherman Jim Ivanski, 61, photos of a 7-kilo salmon he caught recently.

With more harbour industry, "they're going to kill all the spawning," Bulins said. "We're the worst enemies for killing nature."

Larry Ladd, 64, head of the Oshawa Marina Users Committee, which was formed when the OHC evicted the small boaters in 2002, said, "We're not against alternate fuels, just not here."

O'Connor said he exhaustively researched ethanol plants in Canada and the United States for his family-owned FarmTech Energy firm and regards the 16-hectare site as the best of several -- particularly for its dock, since using ships is most economical.

But he could go elsewhere.

"If it's a political nightmare and it takes too much time and effort, we might have to reconsider other options and miss the boat here," he said.

To meet environmental concerns and remain viable, O'Connor said a 37-metre buffer of trees will be built between the giant marsh and his plant, which would be connected to the port by a covered conveyor system to carry the corn from ships.

O'Connor said plans to buy local industrial corn could improve farm business from Hwy. 400 to Belleville.

The federal government cites the potential of 650 outside jobs associated to similar ethanol plants, he added.

Ethanol has many uses, including as a fuel and as booze, O'Connor said. "This is the stuff you drink ... a bio-degradable product ... where vodka coolers come from."

Asphalt, potash, calcium-chloride and highway salt facilities remain on dockland controlled by the OHC.

Rumours of the ethanol plant between existing industry and the South Marsh prompted recently-nominated NDP provincial candidate Sid Ryan to call for a public debate so that all sides can discuss the waterfront and end decades of feuding.

"Industry is continually attempting to make inroads into the waterfront," he said at a pier-side press conference Thursday.

"It would be sheer madness to put in an ethanol plant beside the marsh," he said. "We're one of the few communities on the north shore of this lake that does not have full access to its waterfront."

With differing political and public factions in conflict for decades over the waterfront, Ryan called for Mayor John Gray to hold the summit, and "remove the roadblocks.

"Ethanol plants are absolutely fantastic," said the Canadian Union of Public Employees president.

"But the location is the wrong location."