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As Toronto finds distant holes for its waste, the 905 sees incineration in a new, appealing light

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Despite skepticism and some opposition, Durham Region is deeply committed to building the GTA's first garbage incinerator in 15 years, says the region's works commissioner.

"Years ago, there was a fundamental commitment by Durham Region that there would be no new landfills established (here)," says Cliff Curtis. "And council seems to have bought into the concept that we need to look after our own waste."

That seems to be a unique position in the GTA, where disposing of trash in one's own backyard tends to stink politically.

Sustainable self-sufficiency, with acceptance of some risk, is a goal other regions seem to be avoiding. Toronto and Peel have signed long-term deals to use landfills outside the GTA, though Peel already incinerates half its waste. York plans to turn some of its garbage into pellets to be burned somewhere else. For the time being, Halton has decided to continue to use a Milton landfill.

After the province promised Michigan legislators that Ontario would stop shipping garbage to landfills in the state by 2010, councils across the GTA scrambled to find alternatives.

Most have taken a step back from incineration, long fraught with concerns about emissions.

Halton Region decided to defer considering an energy-from-waste incinerator for five years.

Peel signed a long-term deal with a landfill near Sarnia for half of its trash, despite the fact its Algonquin Power plant in Brampton, built in 1992, already burns almost 140,000 tonnes of garbage a year and is undergoing a retrofit so it can dispose of more.

York signed a deal with a Vaughan company to produce burnable pellets compressed from garbage, while reducing its stake in the joint incinerator project with Durham. Toronto shut down its polluting Commissioners St. incinerator in 1988, and Mayor David Miller has dismissed considering another.

Incinerators are criticized in part because they need a constant stream of garbage to be economically viable. Environmentalists argue that runs counter to efforts to reduce and recycle, principles to which every GTA region has committed itself.

Incinerators are also viewed as a health hazard. But don't say that to the Durham politicians who recently returned from Europe, wowed by advances in incineration technology and how people and smokestacks live cheek-by-jowl, apparently without conflict or fear. "I have a high level of confidence in (incineration)," said Durham Councillor Howie Herrema.

For Curtis, the decision by Toronto to buy the Green Lane landfill site near London, Ont., is a short-term solution. "We are just filling up holes in the ground and eventually we will run out of holes."

York Region was supposed to have been a 50-50 partner with Durham in the joint incinerator project. Its recent decision to slash that involvement brought temporary hope to critics that the plan was dead. Not so, insists Curtis.

"We are still proceeding with the environmental assessment (for the incinerator). The preliminary business case we ran shows it will work even if Durham has to go alone."

It has been scaled down a bit, though. Original plans called for a plant capable of burning more than 250,000 tonnes a year. It's now 200,000 tonnes, Curtis said.

But if the tender call for the plant goes out by year's end as planned, it should be ready around 2011.

The trash stream that was supposed to come from York will be replaced in part by garbage generated by population growth in Durham and neighbouring municipalities such as Peterborough and Northumberland County, which have expressed interest in using it. And there's nothing to prevent York from increasing the amount it wishes to send to the Durham plant in years to come, Curtis said.

Rod Muir, of the Sierra Club of Canada, is skeptical as to whether the plant will be built. "I think politicians (in Durham) for the last three or four years have been kidding themselves if they think (finding a site for an incinerator) will be easier than finding landfill," he said.

Four of the five proposed sites are in Clarington, with a fifth in East Gwillimbury.

Opposition has been slowly growing in Clarington, already home to a nuclear reactor, and East Gwillimbury's council has said they don't want it.

But even though Durham appears to be going it alone for now in championing incineration, it may yet find itself in good company.

Niagara Region and Hamilton have talked of building a joint incinerator, though Niagara has backed away from permitting one within its borders. And Rob Rivers, Halton Region's director of waste management, explains that his region's decision to defer incineration plans doesn't preclude a change of heart five years down the road.

Toronto may someday find itself ringed by incinerators, even as its trash trucks rumble down Highway 401 toward Green Lane.