

Durham leads on trash incineration

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Continued skepticism from environmentalists, along with new landfill capacity in southern Ontario, have unfortunately dampened support for incineration as a way of ridding the Greater Toronto Area of some of its trash. Luckily, that short-sighted trend is being resisted in Durham Region where officials are committed to building a new garbage incinerator by 2011. They deserve support, not criticism.

Modern incineration technology is remarkably clean and each plant can be put to use generating electricity for thousands of homes. This approach is widely used across much of Western Europe and Japan, where tight environmental regulations do an excellent job of protecting the public. And it offers a way for a municipality to process at least part of its rubbish locally instead of having it all trucked away to Michigan, or to someone else's backyard.

Despite these benefits, efforts to produce more energy from waste within the GTA have begun to wane.

Halton Region has shelved an ambitious proposal to turn trash into electricity, one with possibilities that had ranged from a \$250-million facility that would meet Halton's needs to a \$700-million plant big enough to process waste from nearby cities.

York Region has dramatically reduced its involvement in Durham's planned incinerator. York was to pay for half of the \$250-million facility, but recently slashed its commitment to just 12 per cent of the cost.

Unlike other jurisdictions in the GTA, which have at least contemplated incineration, Toronto City Council has long opposed the idea. But that hostility has been reinforced by the city's purchase of the massive Green Lane landfill near St. Thomas. That dump site has the capacity to handle Toronto's waste for years, easing what pressure there may have been to find local solutions, such as incineration.

Despite the retreat or inaction evident in other GTA municipalities, Durham appears to be forging ahead with its facility. "The business case we ran shows it will work even if Durham has to go it alone," Cliff Curtis, the region's works commissioner, says. Given York's reduced involvement, Durham's planned incinerator is being scaled down to one capable of burning 200,000 tonnes, rather than 250,000 tonnes.

A tender call for the plant is to go out within months, with construction to start soon after that on the GTA's first garbage incinerator in 15 years. Hopefully it will be built without any more snags.

A garbage-burning plant has been successfully working in Brampton since 1992, powering several thousand homes. If that example were backed by a new, super-efficient and ultra-clean facility in Durham, it might make more people aware of the huge potential in waste-to-energy technology. It might even win converts in Toronto.