

Enough contention to go around

Mayor Jim Abernethy, a relative newcomer to municipal politics, has stated several times in the past months, that energy-from-waste (EFW) has been the most contentious issue this municipality has ever faced. We're not sure if it's the most contentious ever, but it certainly has dominated the agenda for the first year of this new term of council. No other issue facing municipal council in the past decade has engaged so many members of the public for as long, as this one has, and it's not over yet.

The EFW, as the politicians like to call the proposal to thermally treat our garbage, or the incinerator, as those opposed to the proposal call it, wasn't even on the radar screen during last fall's election campaign. Yet the most crucial decision in the entire process thus far was made in May of 2006, in the waning days of the previous council. "It's your garbage, What do you want us to do with it?" was the question posed in the Region's March 2006 ad campaign, advertising public information sessions held that month. "We need your ideas on how to solve our communities garbage issues," the advertisement stated.

Two months later, in May 2006, the councils of York and Durham Regions approved thermal treatment as their preferred method of managing municipal household garbage after the recyclables have been removed.

It took another full year for the public to realize what was taking place, and that the threat of a garbage incinerator in their municipality was very real. The incinerator issue gained momentum this past spring when the consultants made public their short list of potential sites for the proposed York/Durham EFW. Residents came in droves to the public information sessions last April, held by the Region and their hired consultants, to hear how the four Clarington sites and one York Region site made it onto the short list of potential sites for the EFW. By a vast majority, the residents who spoke during the question and answer portion of these public meetings, are opposed to the proposal. And by a show of hands at a public meeting held last month, most of the residents in attendance were also opposed to the incinerator plan.

At these meetings, the consultants are very skilled at defending their decisions, with the information and data they've collected to support their recommendations. Who can argue with them? Dr. Debra Jefferson from Newcastle said at one public meeting recently, it's not what the consultants 'are' saying that scares me, it's what they're 'not' saying.

The incinerator project is currently undergoing an environmental assessment study, where the potential effects of the project on the environment are assessed. The completed study report must be approved by the Minister of the Environment, before the project can proceed to the design construction phase. The study report must demonstrate that the public was involved in the process. Therefore public input is sought at every key decision making step along the way. Public comments are recorded and become part of the official environmental assessment document.

By all appearances there seems to be a very public and open dialogue taking place around this incinerator issue as the proponents wish to make the process appear transparent.

Public delegations of late have made some very keen observations, and asked a number of pointed questions to council. Clarington council has been requested by residents to declare this municipality an unwilling host for the Region's incinerator. Individual councillors are in the position where they say they can't make a decision, for or against the incinerator until they've heard all the facts. Another fact not lost on Clarington council is that it will make not an ounce of difference to the process whether Clarington is a willing host or not, as the Region already owns the land identified as the preferred site.

What facts are the councillors looking for? The ones quoted by those who have an interest in seeing the incinerator through to its completion -- the Region and their hired consultants? Or are they, as elected officials, interested in the facts quoted by their residents opposed to the incinerator citing health and environmental reasons for their opposition. Or are they seeking the advice of independent experts in the field?

Will public involvement have made any difference in the final outcome? The process will run its course, and there is little doubt that in 2011 household garbage will be burned on the shores of Lake Ontario in Courtice.

Will public input have any effect on what type of incinerator will be constructed, what goes into it, and how it will be monitored? Maybe.

What is certain, it is insulting to the public to ask for their involvement, and then ignore their input -- to pay lip service to the the public process. Another certainty is; there is enough contention on all sides of this incinerator issue.