

Region won't give Clarington blank cheque for incineration studies

May 24, 2007

By Jennifer Stone and Erin Hatfield

DURHAM -- The Region may be up-fronting the cash to pay for a peer review of York and Durham's energy-from-waste (EFW) environmental assessment, but it shouldn't be telling Clarington what studies it's willing to fund, say the municipality's local councillors. Clarington council had instructed staff to undertake an examination of all documentation prepared to date on the proposed EFW project, as well as the adequacy of the public consultation process. Also, staff was to look at the implications of an EFW plant on the proposed Energy Business Park, to be sited very close to two of the short-listed sites.

Staff came back with a list of experts to be hired to complete the study, but they were unable to attach a price tag to the consultation.

"I don't really have a best guess" as to how much it would cost, said Clarington Planning Director David Crome. "One of our difficulties has been to determine the scope of the Region's undertaking ... We can't turn around and ask for a quotation on that until we have a better understanding of the scope."

That's a problem, said all three Regional councillors from Clarington, noting the Region had agreed to up-front "reasonable expenses" for the peer review.

The Region agreed to "reasonable expenses for necessary studies and legal advice," said Ward 3 and 4 Regional Councillor Charlie Trim, Durham's works chairman. "We have to have a figure of some sort ... as to what our planning staff are going to do. I'm not going to give them a blank cheque."

Clarington could wind up out of pocket for the money --- which is not available in the current budget --- should the regions not agree it is necessary to spend all that Clarington staff have suggested.

"This is a blank cheque that we're giving staff but nobody has signed it," said Jim Abernethy who, as Clarington's mayor, sits on Regional Council.

But, Clarington's four local councillors all voted in favour of the staff report, which won 4-3.

Getting a Clarington perspective is absolutely key, they all said.

"I'm astounded," said Ward 1 Councillor Adrian Foster. "I'm astounded that we would let the Region tell us what studies we are able to do ... We want a Clarington-centric view ... I would be shocked if the Region would not cover the cost of this."

It's absolutely necessary to get the information a peer review would provide, said Coun. Foster.

"I've been very anxious to get the information from a Clarington perspective," he said. "There's no concern that there's anything underhanded going on at the Region, but I want to get Clarington's handle on this."

Cost should not be an issue, given the potential magnitude of the project and it's possible ramifications, said Ward 3 Councillor Willie Woo.

"We can't be handcuffed by a limited budget to do our due diligence," he said.

On May 23, the Region's finance and administration committee caught wind of the debate that had occurred at Clarington's general purpose and administration meeting the evening prior. The Region's commissioner of works explained the scope of studies Clarington was looking at might not be exactly what Regional Council had in mind when it agreed to front the cash.

"(Clarington) is basically taking a shotgun approach," Cliff Curtis said. "They want to take a look at everything."

In hopes of clarifying what was meant by "reasonable studies" the works committee is recommending to Regional Council that the funding allocated to studies not exceed \$200,000. Any amount over that will have to come back to regional council for approval.

"Above that \$200,000 if they want to come back with stuff that is reasonable then we will consider that," said Regional Chairman Roger Anderson. "Clarington is dealing with this on Monday (at its council meeting) and I think a message needs to be sent that this isn't a blank cheque."

durhamregion.com