

Durham Region approves huge garbage incinerator

Amid anger at the plan, council vows facility will have high safety, emission standards

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Durham Region will build the GTA's first waste incinerator in 16 years.

After 12 hours of hand-wringing, soul-searching and impassioned speeches, council voted 19 to 7 last night to approve a preferred site in Clarington, recommended by consultants last fall.

The site will now undergo an environmental assessment, and a technology and vendor will be chosen. A business plan must be drawn up and a site health study done.

Along with its hotly debated decision to approve the site, council agreed the facility should conform to the highest possible safety and emission control standards.

While council must still make a final decision on whether to go ahead with the project once all the information is in, Councillor Brian Nicholson, the most vocal opponent, charged the outcome had been determined from the start.

He criticized the "seriously flawed process" that led to last night's vote, pointing out that Clarington council had "begged" them to defer a decision until they had all the facts.

Regional Chair Roger Anderson, a long-time proponent, countered that "sometimes we'll make decisions that local councils don't like. This is our responsibility, our decision."

Earlier, council listened to dozens of speakers, almost all opposed to the project, in a tense day full of anger, frustration and, at times, tears.

"The impact of this incinerator on my kids' health will be devastating," said Coleen Fodor, whose youngest two developed asthma because of poor air quality. "Please consider the health of all the children in our community."

It was the first time the mother of four had spoken out publicly against the incinerator that would be built less than 10 kilometres from her home in Newcastle.

"I'm sorry," she whispered tearfully to councillors. "I get very emotional when it comes to my kids."

With many details about the proposed energy-from-waste facility still unknown, concerned residents and councillors want answers to two key questions: Is it safe and is it affordable?

The incinerator – a joint project with York Region which has a 12 per cent stake – will have a capacity of between 150,000 and 400,000 tonnes of trash a year. Processing 250,000 tonnes will create enough energy to power 15,000 homes, the project team says.

The preferred site, now endorsed by York Region officials and Durham council, is a 12-hectare property between Courtice and Osbourne Rds. south of Highway 401. Owned by Durham, the site is near a nuclear power plant.

The final price tag isn't known, but estimates range from \$150 million to \$250 million.

Opponents cite concerns over health risks, environmental damage and the financial burden. They say not enough is known about the impact in any of these areas, and want politicians to explore other options such as landfill as well as doing more to divert and reduce waste.

At the very least, the critics want council's site decision deferred until a business plan is done and the technology and vendor chosen.

The project team has assured the public that air emissions from the incinerator will meet or exceed environment ministry standards. Diversion remains a high priority, they say, and only the waste left after those efforts will be burned.

Faced with the closing of Michigan landfill sites to Ontario's garbage, Anderson says a non-landfill solution is the only choice and that the goal of zero waste isn't viable.

The last incinerator in the GTA was built in Brampton in 1992 and has operated with little controversy. Halton and Niagara regions and Hamilton are also considering building one.

One surprise delegate was a Swedish diplomat who came from Ottawa to extol the virtues of burning trash using current technologies. Sweden has 30 incinerators that burn more than 4 million tonnes of waste per year with no harmful emissions, Magnus Schonning said.

While expensive to build, an incinerator should start turning a profit from energy sales and waste fees in five to 10 years, he said.

Asked if incineration is safe, he replied: "I can't see my country doing something that would be harmful to its citizens."

His voice was a lone one as speakers took turns lambasting politicians and the site selection process.

"There isn't one single technology out there that will keep the crap out of the sky. Incineration makes people sick," charged Kristin McKinnon-Rutherford.