

Incinerator approved, but opposition burns

It's a quick yes in York, but in Durham, site of joint facility, protesters slow decision to crawl

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The two votes giving final approval for the site of the GTA's first incinerator in 16 years, a joint project of Durham and York regions, couldn't have been more different.

In Whitby, the headquarters of host municipality Durham, it involved 12 hours of hand-wringing, soul-searching and impassioned speeches before council voted 19-7 late Wednesday night to approve a site in Clarington, east of Oshawa.

In Newmarket yesterday, home to York Region council, the final vote took seconds. No debate, no discussion, just a show of hands – and it was over.

"It means we've been thorough in our process," said Vaughan Councillor Mario Ferri. He co-chairs the regional joint waste-management committee that has been powering forward on the controversial energy-from-waste incinerator project, which will deal with some of York's trash once Michigan closes its border to the GTA's garbage in 2010.

"We've gone through an open process, we've encouraged people to tell us what their concerns are," he said. "We are not done yet. This is another step along the way, but an important step."

The one York Region municipality on the short list of sites, East Gwillimbury, stated an unequivocal "no" to hosting the incinerator.

The other four sites on the short list, including the one selected, are in Clarington, in Durham Region.

Studies of potential health and economic risks have yet to be done and the technology has not yet been decided. That accounts for at least some of the emotion of residents opposed to the project at the Durham Region meeting.

"The impact of this incinerator on my kids' health will be devastating," said Coleen Fodor, whose youngest two children suffer from asthma. "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, which would be 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."

Oshawa Councillor Brian Nicholson, a vocal opponent, charged the outcome had been pre-determined from the beginning. He criticized the "seriously flawed process" that led to the Durham vote, pointing out that the council in Clarington had "begged" the region to defer a decision until it had all the facts.

York Region will hold a 12 per cent stake in the plant, which will be able to process 150,000 to 400,000 tonnes of trash a year and produce enough electricity to power 15,000 homes. Opponents cite concerns about health risks, environmental damage and the financial burden.

"This is our responsibility, our decision," said Durham chair Roger Anderson, a long-time proponent. "Sometimes we'll make decisions that local councils don't like."

Toronto rejected incineration for its surplus waste, deciding instead last year to buy the Green Lane Landfill site near London, Ont.

With files from Carola Vyhna