

Toronto Sun
January 27, 2008

Durham's burning issue

Incinerator foes worry that garbage in will lead to garbage out

By SARAH GREEN, SUN MEDIA

It's a 12-hectare plot of undeveloped land in Clarington.

But this unassuming piece of property has sparked a firestorm of controversy as Durham Region steams ahead with a proposal to build a multi-million dollar, energy-from-waste facility on the site.

The project faces growing opposition from residents in Clarington and beyond who say the region should be looking at more environmentally friendly and less toxic alternatives to burning trash.

"This is not a NIMBY issue," said retired school principal Wayne Ellis, an Oshawa resident who heads up the Durham Waste Coalition. "We don't want this built anywhere in the province of Ontario."

Regional councils in Durham and York -- the municipalities are partners in the incinerator project with Durham contributing 88% of the capital costs and 88% of the trash -- approved last week the 12-hectare Clarington site as the location for the proposed facility.

The regions must now draw up a business plan, choose a vendor and a technology and conduct an environmental risk assessment on the Clarington site, located just south of Hwy. 401 between Courtice and Osborne Rds.

The facility is expected to cost between \$150 to \$160 million -- the "ultimate size" carries a price tag of \$250 million, allowing for future growth, said Durham Regional Chair Roger Anderson -- and burn up to 160,000 tonnes of trash a year.

Heat generated by the facility would be used to generate electricity for 12,000 homes, or every regional facility, including water and sewer plants which are the highest users of hydro, Anderson said.

"We firmly believe landfill is not a good solution. We've been through the landfill wars in Toronto and other (municipalities)," Anderson said. "Once you put it in the ground, it's there for hundreds of years."

Anderson said the region should continue investigating incineration as a viable option to dispose of Durham's garbage once the Michigan border closes to local trash in 2010. But he stressed no final decision has been made.

"This isn't, by any means, the last say on anything," Anderson said. "There's lots more questions to be asked, lots more answers to get."

When Ellis first heard of the project, "I thought it was a great idea. It sounds wonderful, doesn't it. We're going to create energy from waste," he said. "What they weren't saying is they were investigating building an incinerator."

Since then, Ellis said he's been concerned about the transparency of the project. He wonders why consultants narrowed in on the Clarington site when the air is already compromised, according to national pollution numbers which don't count traffic emissions from the neighbouring 401. He questions choosing a site before the vendor is chosen and an environmental assessment is done.

"They're ramrodding this thing through," Ellis said.

If approved, the incinerator would be the first to open in the GTA since 1992 when the ribbon was cut on the Algonquin Power plant in Brampton.

The privately owned facility processes 174,000 tonnes of trash each year, the bulk taken from Peel Region's curbside pickup.

It burned 130,000 tonnes of Peel's waste last year with heat from the incineration used to create steam to run a turbine to generate six megawatts of electricity. A local factory also plans to pipe Algonquin's steam to its manufacturing facility.

Andy Pollock, Peel's director of waste management, said incineration became the solution when the region decided in the late 1980s to manage its trash within its borders without opening any new landfills. The region still ships half its waste to Michigan.

"The region's philosophy is recycle and compost everything we can," Pollock said, noting Peel diverts more than 50% of its waste. "Whatever is left over, convert that to energy."

NO COMPLAINTS

Emissions from the Bramalea Rd. facility are monitored monthly by the ministry of the environment and fall well below provincial standards, Pollock said.

"It has really operated without any public complaint since it opened in 1992," Pollock said.

The facility has five two-stage incinerators which burn the waste, then the off gases. The bottom ash, which is left over after the trash is burned, is used to cover landfill and it's also mixed with asphalt for regional paving jobs, Pollock said. The toxic fly ash is stabilized and disposed in a secure landfill.

It's one of the many drawbacks to incineration, with as much as 30% of the burned waste left as ash, opponents say.

"This is incineration and landfill," said Durham regional councillor Brian Nicholson, who is against the project. "The bottom line is the three Rs. You can't just put it in a hole in the ground."

Nicholson said he's concerned about spiralling costs for the incinerator -- it could add hundreds to taxpayers' current \$90 bill for waste management -- and the health effects of emissions from the plant. He's also worried the region isn't investigating other options.

"They don't have a Plan B," Anderson said. "This is a single track process. If it fails, they're looking at a disaster."

Linda Gasser, a 20-year Clarington resident who has spoken out at many meetings against the incinerator, urged the region to pursue aggressive recycling and composting programs. The goal should be to divert 70% of waste by 2010.

"There are other options. We don't have to do this," Gasser said.