

Garbage-incineration folly: It's anything but clean and progressive

JOHN BARBER

jbarber@globeandmail.com

February 12, 2008

The idea to build a garbage incinerator on the shores of Lake Ontario is so nutty in so many ways it is unlikely to survive.

There hasn't been a single garbage incinerator built in North America since 1985. It's a dirty technology that costs way more than all the responsible alternatives, especially recycling and other forms of diversion, and it directly undermines them.

The fact that this plan is still alive, however, suggests there is no limit to nuttiness in Durham Region. Either way, the process stands as a compelling study in the perversion of public policy.

Blinding warning signals have already killed similar plans for garbage incinerators in Halton, Niagara and Hamilton. York Region cut its planned stake in the Durham burner from 50 per cent to 12.

But Durham bulls ahead, oblivious.

Recently the municipality of Clarington, just east of Oshawa, voted itself an "unwilling host" for the burner. Mayor Jim Abernethy, who found himself on the losing end of council's 3-4 vote, then invited four incinerator proponents to address a special meeting of council, scheduled for last evening.

One of them is Magnus Schonning, a Swedish diplomat lobbying tirelessly to obtain contracts for Swedish manufacturers of ultra-expensive, unnecessary garbage-burning equipment.

The rubes are endlessly susceptible to techno-babble from Sweden, a country that has miraculously transcended the need for landfills by exporting thousands if not millions of tonnes of incinerator ash - by weight equal to 30 per cent of the burned garbage - to other countries every year.

How modern! How progressive!

Then there is a couple from Peel Region, which is forever lauded for having operated a small garbage incinerator since the 1980s - at twice the price it pays to landfill the majority of its waste.

But this is exactly the kind of old-tech incinerator the industry insists it no longer builds. If what the industry now promises in terms of emissions were actually regulated, the Peel incinerator would close.

Finally, there is Jim McKay of consultant Jacques Whitford Limited, which is managing the environmental assessment of the Durham incinerator. The company is also a member of the

Canadian Energy-From-Waste Coalition, the incinerator industry lobbying association, which is why it no longer has a contract with Niagara Region.

I guess he'll now have more time to guide Durham through the process.

The gravest reason to fear the Durham folly is the success its proponents have had with the biggest boner in their repertoire: that incineration is a way of making "energy from waste."

People like the idea, and they're willing to buy it.

But data from the proponents themselves have already proved that incineration is an incredibly inefficient, dirty way to generate electricity. Low-tech, coal-fired plants have better emissions profiles than incinerators. Compared to the energy consumed, the amount of dirty energy created by burning garbage is marginal at best.

New research shows that recycling and composting save at least three times as much energy as incineration returns. Recycling plastic pop bottles saves 26 times as much energy as you can get from burning them, according to U.S researcher Jeffrey Morris.

And yet Durham Region proposes to build a high-tech pop-bottle burner right next door to the mighty Darlington nuclear station, one of the most modern facilities of its type in the world.

Burning garbage on that shore is supposed to provide power for 15,000 homes, emitting more pollution in the process than the old coal plants currently being shut down because they are so polluting. Darlington is big enough to power two million homes without a single airborne emission.

How nutty can you get?

<http://tinyurl.com/39pq4o>