

Metroland – Opinion Column

On incineration, we don't speak Swedish But to duplicate it here would take money, infrastructure and mindset change

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By Jennifer Stone

Many times since the incinerator debate began, Sweden has been held up as the paragon of incineration done right.

And insofar as incineration can be done right -- the jury's still out on that one -- it seems from listening to Swedish Embassy First Secretary Magnus Schonning, his country is doing it.

But that doesn't necessarily mean we can find a direct energy from waste translation from Swedish.

Mr. Schonning was among a number of pro-incineration speakers invited to talk at Clarington council by Mayor Jim Abernethy earlier this week. He's also been a delegate to Durham council.

In fact, he's been on something of a one-man crusade to spread the gospel of Swedish-style incineration across Ontario.

Not surprising, really, given that a 2006 study found on the Swedish embassy's website talks about potential business opportunities in Canada, in an effort to "promote increased awareness of Swedish technology and products in Canada in order to drive demand."

Further into the document it's more specific in its target, recommending Swedish officials "connect with municipalities that are considering the use of waste-to-energy facilities for processing municipal waste and build on Sweden's reputation as a leader in waste-to-energy technology."

Sounds like what Mr. Schonning's been doing.

Questions of motivation aside, Mr. Schonning painted a fairly pretty picture of incineration, brushing off questions about why Sweden send the fly ash that is a byproduct of the process to other countries, saying it needs to be dealt with at specialized landfills and not every country has one.

Well, Sweden certainly wouldn't have them. Landfill of any kind is a last resort there.

Mr. Schonning also said Sweden has an elaborate, systemic approach to waste management, with stringent legislated producer responsibility for packaging, tires, waste paper, vehicles and many other items. He spoke of a land where toothpaste tubes don't come in boxes and where Barbies aren't in the near-bondage considered normal packaging here. He spoke of a place where people are encouraged not to use practices that create carbon dioxide, where crippling taxes on oil make it a totally unattractive choice. None of those things are in practice here.

But the fact that really caught my ear was this: though proponents here are quick to point out the possible electricity generation EFW brings with it, that's not what Swedes largely use it for. Asked if EFW was seen as an alternative to nuclear energy, Mr. Schonning said no, "because EFW gets very little, relatively speaking, electricity out of it."

Huh?

So, why use it? Well, for heating, said Mr. Schonning. Sweden began in the 1940s to put the infrastructure in place to run district heating systems, with pipes running the water from plants and each home having a heat exchanger. And that's another thing we don't have here -- the infrastructure to make district heating commonplace, never mind the dollars necessary to pay for such a pricey endeavour.

Sweden may well be an excellent model for sustainable waste management, but it's what we don't have that makes it almost impossible to replicate here.

Reporter Jennifer Stone's column appears occasionally in this space. E-mail jstone@durhamregion.com.