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Councillors disagree on venue for info sessions

At the end of a ten hour council meeting, Councillor Adrian Foster told the Mayor that a council meeting was not the proper venue for his information meetings.

Mayor Abernethy had scheduled four individuals to speak to council on incineration, at the Monday, February 11 council meeting. That meeting reached the 11 pm deadline recently established for council meetings, before three of the speakers had the opportunity to make their presentations. The meeting was recessed until 5 p.m. Wednesday, February 14. On Wednesday, the meeting reached the 11 p.m. deadline as well, even though one of the invited guests did not show up.

As the Municipality has adopted an "Unwilling Host" status towards the Region's proposed energy from waste (EFW) facility, Councillor Foster did not think it appropriate that the Mayor held a special information meeting on incineration. The Region has approved a location in Courtice, the preferred site for the proposed EFW.

"The purpose (of this meeting) is to give us information. That's the one thing there's been: a tremendous lack of information. How many times have I heard councillors say, 'We need answers to our questions'?" Abernethy asked. While Foster did not agree that the council needed more information, he did not believe the council meeting was the proper venue for the Mayor's information sessions.

The Mayor is planning to hold two additional information meetings: one on landfill and another on zero waste. He told councillors on Monday, he believed council was a good venue to have invited guests present information. At the end of Wednesday's meeting, Councillor Adrian Foster said he was going to speak to the Clerk to stop this type of meeting from happening again.

Abernethy said he wasn't trying to eliminate debate because this was such a contentious issue, but he didn't feel a lot is achieved in a back and forth debate. A number of the 18 residents who spoke at the special meeting asked for an open debate on the proposed EFW facility.

Monday's council meeting ended with Mr. Magnus Schonning, First Secretary with the Swedish Embassy in Ottawa, telling council how in his country 29 EFW facilities are part of the waste management program.

When council re-assembled at 5 p.m. Wednesday, Mr. Edward Goertzen, a former member of the Region's Waste Management Advisory Committee, made his presentation. Goertzen was one of the 14 citizen members on the Advisory Committee, who developed the Region's "Long Term Waste Management Strategy Plan", which was adopted by the Region in 1999.

One of the 27 recommendations in this Plan was to consider an energy from waste (EFW) type facility for the disposal of residual garbage waste. While the Advisory Committee was disbanded in 1999, Goertzen became concerned of late that the plan his committee recommended was going "off the rails". He urged council to stay the course. "To derail the long term project at this point would be folly," he told councillors.

Mr. Steve Plaice, stood in for Jim Mackay who could not come back to the Wednesday meeting. Plaice works for the consultants hired by the Region to guide them through the EFW environmental assessment process, and he updated council on how the process has been undertaken to date.

Abernethy's fourth guest, members of the Peel Region EFW facility Public Liaison Committee, were in attendance at the Monday night meeting, but did not return for the continuation session, and therefore did not get the opportunity to make their presentation. After the invited guests were finished speaking and councillors had finished asking questions, the 18 members of the public who had registered to speak, were given their five minutes each in which to make their presentations to council.

Many of the public who spoke said they would prefer to have a different venue for any future information sessions. When asked by councillors if they would prefer to have an open debate on the EFW issues, the residents said "yes".

Wayne Ellis, Chair of the Durham Waste Coalition, took councillors by surprise when he told them that the Ministry of Environment is working on a project to establish 30 large landfill sites in Ontario. This initiative, according to Ellis, is in direct response to the understanding that the Michigan border will close to Ontario garbage in 2010. A senior engineer with the Ministry of Environment (MOE) told Ellis that locations for the five northern landfill sites have been publicly disclosed. But the 25 southern Ontario sites, which will be along major highways, have not yet been made public because it will create some controversy. As the MOE has set new landfill regulations in 1998, these new landfill sites will be like the one in Nova Scotia, where they control what goes into the landfill, and not the old style landfill that the public is so familiar with, according to Ellis.

Mayor Abernethy's response to the information Ellis brought forward, was, "Mayor Abernethy doesn't support landfill, never has."

According to Ellis, the MOE engineer wanted to make it clear the MOE has no official position on incineration. "The Engineers' position is," Ellis told council, "the goal for the Region of Durham should be to manage waste. Not to build incinerators, but to increase the three R's." The engineer said that two other recent attempts to build incinerators in Ontario have failed, and he predicted this one will fail too.

The public portion of the council meeting ended shortly after 11 p.m., then councillors went into closed session to discuss a confidential verbal report concerning a Labour Relations Matter.