

Keep the focus where it should be: on health

Don't let pipe-dreams avert your thinking

Sun Mar 09, 2008

By Jennifer Stone

Take note of the following sentence: "Durham should be responsible to Durham's garbage and we should tell our neighbours to keep their garbage the hell out."

That's just a snippet of Regional Chairman Roger Anderson's big talk during last week's Clarington Board of Trade luncheon.

There's good reason to remember that comment, because if you combine it with new diversion goals, it makes you wonder why we'd need to build an incinerator.

The comment came on the heels of the Region taking an aggressive approach to reducing waste. Coming soon to Clarington: weekly recycling pickup and a bi-weekly garbage pickup. Not only will the garbage-recycling schedule flip, but we will also be required to use clear bags, which will allow for enforcement of more environmentally sustainable practices. Or, to put it another way, "if the garbage bag has compostable or recyclable material in it, the collector will leave it for you so you can sort through it," said Mr. Anderson, somewhat menacingly, during the luncheon. "You can keep that now-wet garbage and keep it for two weeks."

Well good. It's about time use of sustainable waste programs was enforced. Hitting the Region's 70 per cent diversion target can't succeed without that.

But, the question is, if we get to 70 per cent diversion, do we really need an incinerator? After all, those things don't work unless they have a constant source of fuel. In fact, a Swedish embassy delegate recently told Clarington council that when Sweden runs short of trash to burn, they simply chop down trees and burn wood in their incinerators because you can't keep firing them up and shutting them down and have them run efficiently. So if we hit 70 per cent, will we need to import trash from our neighbours? Can't do that -- Mr. Anderson said so.

Not only that, but Sweden requires its incinerators to run constantly because they heat communities through district heating.

Which brings us to the most recent apparent attempt by the Region to shift focus away from potential health and environmental risks and onto a potential positive: district heating.

For a while, Regional reps, including Clarington Mayor Jim Abernethy, were tossing out the idea of heating Oshawa's GM plant with steam produced by the incinerator. Of course, they hadn't approached GM with that idea, and when the auto-maker was asked about it, a spokesman said it wasn't particularly interested.

Enter the next big idea which came from the chairman at the luncheon: now, Mr. Anderson proposes building 42 kilometres of pipe to Seaton north of Pickering -- at a conservatively estimated \$150 a metre -- to help heat the homes which may eventually be built there.

Is it a pipe-dream? Well, no, it's undoubtedly doable. But that you can do something doesn't necessarily make it a good idea. And certainly, Durham residents shouldn't let this sort of musing shift their focus from where it should be: on health and environmental issues related to burning garbage.