

Landfills safer than in past, say MOE reps

Assessment and approvals process takes years, they say

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By Jennifer Stone

CLARINGTON -- Modern landfills are safer than in the past but getting through the assessment and approvals process can take a long time, Ministry of the Environment representatives told Clarington council Monday.

And that lengthy process would apply to attempts to reopen existing but closed landfills, like the Hale site near Newtonville, council was told.

The two representatives were on hand at the request of Mayor Jim Abernethy, who is offering information sessions during council meetings to discuss waste management-related topics in the face of a proposed incinerator in Courtice.

Late last year, in answer to a question from Durham Regional Chairman Roger Anderson about where the Region was in terms of a contingency plan in case the proposed incinerator was delayed or dumped, Works Director Cliff Curtis said talks had been underway for the previous six months with the operators of three landfill sites in Ontario -- including the Hale site near Newtonville.

At the time, dump owner Jimmy Hale had said he hadn't been notified by the Region.

Some residents suggested raising the spectre of the Hale dump reopening was little more than a ploy to divert the attention of residents bent on avoiding landfill in their municipality, into supporting the incinerator.

But councillors were told Monday an environmental assessment to either add capacity to an existing site or build a new one is a multi-year process. Construction can also take a long time, given the type of engineering now required to catch leachate and methane.

"It's equivalent to what you've done for an incinerator," said Ian Parrot, of the Ministry of Environment's Toronto office. "It's the same process and it probably takes a similar amount of time. There's a big variation."

The last landfill allowed in Ontario, near Sarnia, took six years to get through the approvals process, Mr. Parrot said.

"As far as actually commissioning (a site for use after completing the EA), it depends on how much engineering is required," he said.

In terms of the Hale site, "they have a small amount of remaining capacity but if they chose to use that remaining capacity, they would have to go through an EA," said Dave Fumerton, of the MoE's York-Durham office.

Concerns over potential emissions from either method of waste management -- incineration or landfill -- have been discussed over the last several months in Clarington. Specifically, residents have raised concerns about dioxins created during the incineration process. Mayor Abernethy asked if dioxins were emitted from landfill.

"No, not unless they've been placed there, which is not normal," Mr. Parrot said.

That's not to say there are no emissions.

"One of the emissions certainly is that they stink or they can smell," Mr. Fumerton said. "At Keele and Brock West, they contain the (gas) emissions and pump them into systems that generate electricity so that's a very positive thing they're doing with that."

There are also other emissions resulting from the breakdown of materials, Mr. Parrot said.

There have been three new landfills approved in the province in the last year and one remains in the approvals process, the Ministry representatives said.

"The landfills you've recently done the EAs on -- are they safe?" Councillor Adrian Foster asked.

"In my opinion, yes," Mr. Parrot said. Landfills are different from what they used to be, he added. Stabilization, by removing recyclables and other materials from the waste stream, as well as use of liners to catch potential leachate before it affects water and methods of catching methane before it enters the atmosphere, are all in use now.

"A landfill site today is very different from what it was 30 years ago," he said.