

Plasco plant awaits serious testing

It could be two years before the city and its waste-to-energy partner get the go-ahead for a full-scale facility, ministry official says

Jake Rupert, The Ottawa Citizen

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Provincial environment ministry officials say it's far too early for them to know if a proposed waste-disposal technology for the city will be a success because serious emissions testing has not yet begun.



Plasco CEO Rod Bryden, right, gave diplomatic community members a tour of the Plasco plant in May, showing them the benefits the technology has for the disposal of garbage.

Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

stands to make money through sales

to other governments if the technology is a success. The process could also alleviate the need for new landfills in the municipality.

In a report on the proposed deal, city officials say results from the pilot project have been "encouraging," and that, contingent on the technology's approval, it's a good idea to get a long-term deal in place now to reduce any lag time in getting the full-scale facility built.

The city's landfill capacity is running out, and it is pursuing a range of disposal technologies to find a solution.

In fact, it may take two years before a full-scale waste-to-electricity plant of the kind the city wants to build will get approval, said Steve Burns, ministry district manager for Eastern Ontario.

Last week, the city announced plans to enter into a conditional agreement with Ottawa-based Plasco to build a plant that could handle all of the city's non-recyclable residential garbage. The company is running a pilot project at the city-owned Trail Road dump, partly so the ministry can test its process for converting waste to energy and assess how much pollution it emits.

Plasco's process is meant to convert garbage to gas that can then be burned to produce electricity, a quantity of glass-like material that has industrial uses, and a small amount of hazardous waste carried over from the original trash.

"We're really in the beginning stages," said Mr. Burns. "We have really limited data for us to look at right now. It's way too early to pass judgment."

The city, which is a partner with the company,

Albert Shames, the city's waste director, said because of the unique business relationship involved, the city is pre-committing to Plasco for future residential waste disposal contingent on the technology's success and ministry approval.

At the same time, city garbage officials are also investigating other companies' technologies, with an eye toward cost, the size of facilities needed and how much garbage is necessary to make them economically viable.

"We can't leave ourselves in a position that we are caught short," Mr. Shames said. "We have to know what's going to be viable if we end up in a situation where Plasco isn't viable,

if it doesn't get ministry approval."

He said a report on the various options will be put before council in the fall.

Mr. Burns said the ministry has nine days of data supplied by Plasco, showing emissions for basic chemicals from its waste-to-electricity process are well below legal limits when the gas is not put through the energy-generation part of the process.

He said the ministry has less than an hour's worth of data on emissions when energy is produced, and those emissions are well below limits, too.

Nevertheless, the plant has only briefly run at full capacity, the testing equipment hasn't been checked to see if it's functioning properly, more detailed testing for more dangerous chemicals such as dioxin (a serious carcinogen) will begin in a couple of weeks, and the plant will have to run at capacity for extended periods before the samples become representative of its cleanliness.

"What we can say now is that it's been meeting emissions standards so far, but our experts will need to pore over a lot more data," he said. "This is an important project for everyone."

Mr. Burns estimated it will take two years before a full-scale plant like the one the city has in mind would get full approval from the ministry.

Even if it does get built or the city decides to go with a different technology for residential waste, it doesn't solve the problem of disappearing landfill space, because residential garbage only makes up 30 per cent of the municipality's entire waste stream.

The rest comes from industrial, commercial and institutional sources, over which the city has no control. While the province does have rules for recycling in these areas, they are routinely not enforced.

To fill the void, the city, in conjunction with the province and officials from these sectors, is developing a strategy to promote waste reduction and recycling and encourage sector members to stop dumping their waste in landfills.

Mr. Shames said jurisdictional gaps and other difficulties need to be addressed before big reduction and alternative disposal programs will come to the non-residential sectors.

A draft of a strategy to achieve these goals will be put before council next month.