

Thursday, July 3, 2008

Editorial

What are we waiting for?

The Otter Creek Landfill site on the outskirts of Halifax must be some kind of a mirage. A Durham Region contingent went to Nova Scotia two weekends ago to tour the landfill site and some nearby composting facilities. Some of the councillors on the tour came back with very negative comments, while others felt that stabilized landfill is a viable waste diversion option.

Clarington councillors Charlie Trim and Mary Novak took part in the trip, and were not impressed with what they saw at the Otter Creek Landfill - the only stabilized landfill site in North America.

Stabilized landfill is a three stage process where waste is mechanically and manually sorted to remove recyclables, hazardous materials and organics, is bio-stabilized to decompose biodegradable organics and transferred to the onsite landfill.

This was Trim's second trip in two years to the Halifax landfill site, and he's not convinced that stabilized landfill is a better option than burning Durham Region's residual waste. Councillor Trim is Chair of the Region's Works Department, under whose umbrella the proposed energy from waste (EFW) project falls. The Region of Durham, in partnership with York Region, is involved in an environmental assessment (EA) for an EFW facility site for Courtice. Early in the EA process, it was determined that thermal treatment (incineration) is the preferred option for residual waste management.

Part of the EA requires that alternatives to the preferred option be considered. Four options were considered and explored by the consultants: three types of thermal treatment and a mechanical biological treatment of waste. Durham Region ruled out any new landfills within the Region in 1999, when they passed a resolution banning them. As a result, stabilized landfill was never explored as an option for the treatment of our residual waste.

In his verbal report at last Monday's Council meeting, Trim said he would certainly not support stabilized landfill if it's like Otter Lake. He said it was smelly, and methane gas was released into the atmosphere. Councillor Novak said it was not all bad, but Halifax residents are still putting recyclables into their garbage bags. However, other Regional Councillors, those not as sold on incineration, came back from the Nova Scotia trip with positive comments about their experience.

One does wonder why the Region undertook the trip when they claim stabilized landfill is not on the horizon for Durham. Furthermore, the trip was conducted at a time when the landfill facility was in a construction phase, so the delegation could not even obtain access to the actual landfill site. One wonders whether the trip was organized to have a negative outcome.

Recently released figures from Statistics Canada reveal that in the two year period from 2004 to 2006 (the most recent numbers available), Nova Scotian waste diversion rates increased by 15 percent. Ontario's waste diversion rate over that same period decreased by .7 percent.

Nova Scotia has taken a province wide approach to waste management, and is recognized as a national and international leader in waste management strategies.

Durham Region's waste diversion figures for 2007 are at 50 percent, but do not include waste from industrial, commercial or institutional facilities. In some areas, including Clarington, multi residential units are included. According to Statistics Canada, only one third of waste for disposal comes from residential sources.

Clearly there are lessons to be learned from the Nova Scotia example. Mr. Bob Kenney, Nova Scotia's Environment Solid Waste Resource Analyst, says that waste diversion has increased in the areas where clear bag garbage programs have been initiated by 30 to 40 percent. Why does Durham have to conduct a three-month pilot of the program at a cost of \$30,000, when the program has demonstrated substantial positive results elsewhere. What could be the downside of initiating the clear bag program region-wide in January 2009?

With a current recycling rate of 50 percent, an additional diversion rate of 30 to 40 percent would bring us close to, if not over our goal of 70 percent by 2010. What are we waiting for?