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Waste Management

Ottawa city council votes in favour of plasma gasification plant to process municipal waste

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There could be a wait of up to two years, but the City of Ottawa has decided to go ahead with a deal to have some of its garbage destroyed in a plasma gasification process that would return electricity to the power grid.

Council voted unanimously Wednesday to negotiate a contract with Plasco Energy Group to have the company build a gasification plant to handle about 400 tonnes of municipal garbage a day.

There is a proviso. Before the deal is finally closed, Plasco's existing pilot plant must demonstrate that all emissions standards are being met.

The company built the small pilot plant about two years ago and it has been producing electricity intermittently as it was fine-tuned. Serious emissions testing has just begun, but the system still has kinks that must be ironed out. That's why, a ministry spokesman said, it's "way to early to pass judgment."

The proposed full-sized plant would cost about \$125 million, paid for by Plasco. The company would make its money by charging the city about \$8 million a year to destroy a significant amount of its garbage.

Under the terms of a deal proposed by Plasco, the city would receive royalties of up to \$3.5 million a year if Plasco plants are sold and operated in other cities or countries. That's because the city has been a partner in testing the technology at the pilot plant, which is located at a city landfill.

Plasma gasification is a sealed system that breaks down garbage at extremely high temperatures. There should be few emissions because the process takes place in an oxygen-starved environment, so there is no incineration.

The process and the proposal have attracted wide interest from other cities in Canada, including Toronto, as well as off shore.

Although it may take up to two years to get all the approvals needed for the new plant, city officials have estimated that it would take even longer for a new landfill to be approved.

The cost of any such landfill would reach \$150 million, they say.