

February 20, 2008

Debate needed on EFW

Though the Mayor's special meeting to "explore our waste options" was over seven hours long, it fell far short of its intended goal.

Mayor Jim Abernethy invited four representatives to last Monday's council meeting to make presentations on the proposed energy from waste (EFW) facility. This EFW is the proposed long term solution to the waste management challenges of Durham Region.

All of the Mayor's invited presenters were people who he knew would speak in favour of EFW. Unfortunately they were not experts in the field, and therefore brought nothing new to the table.

While the Swedish delegate spoke very knowledgably about how Sweden's waste is handled, we do not live in Sweden. When comparing two waste management programs, you have to look at the entire program, not just bits and pieces to suit your needs. Sweden has an extensive extended producer responsibility policy. The Swedish delegate also stated that when they don't have enough garbage to burn in their incinerators they can cut down trees and burn wood chips, because Sweden has lots of trees. Is this an option we would consider? On the subject of nano-particles: the Swedish delegate was uninformed, saying the science is too new, and he had not seen any studies on that issue.

Mayor Abernethy has repeatedly stated that the big question he needs answered, pertaining to the EFW is, "Is it safe?" The man from Sweden was unable to answer that burning question.

The next presenter on the Mayor's list of invited guests was a former member of the Region's Waste Management Advisory Committee, who had input into the creation of the 1999 Long Term Waste Management Strategy Plan.

This gentleman said we can't blame local incidents of asthma on incineration because the facility isn't built yet; Durham could be a good neighbour and pay for the incinerator quicker by burning our neighbour's waste; we should fill up shopping carts at stores with the waste we get from them; nano-particles are not dangerous, and that money is a just a concept. This presentation was a total waste of time and the man should never have been given an audience.

The third presenter worked for the consulting company hired by the Region to take it through the environmental assessment (EA) process. This man, while an expert on the EA process, was no expert on incineration either. The consultants have already established the EFW will meet Ministry of Environment guidelines of acceptable risk, they now just have to do the site specific tests that will prove their assumptions. There was nothing in this individual's presentation that councillors didn't already know.

The Mayor's initiative to get information to council is laudable. However, this particular effort did not deliver. It appears the presenters were chosen on their pro incineration position, rather than their ability to inform. Having an information session as part of council meeting means the rules of council apply and only councillors can ask questions of the presenters. Municipal staff have to be in attendance at council meetings, so 10 paid staff members had to sit through the entire 10 hour meeting. Space in the council chambers is limited to approximately 120 people. Individuals who wish to address council at these meetings must register in advance, then have only five minutes to speak. As the news

release for this meeting was issued after 5 p.m. on Thursday, February 6, potential delegates had only a day and a half to register to speak at the Monday, February 11th council meeting.

A number of the residents who did speak to council stated they would prefer a public information meeting where the pros and cons of incineration are debated. Mayor Abernethy said, "I don't think a lot is achieved with the back and forth of a debate." We beg to differ. When people, representing two differing sides in a debate are allowed to put forward their points and given an opportunity to defend them, a lot is achieved. We should be demanding the right to hear both sides of the incineration issue in this type of an information session. The Region declined to participate in the two previous incineration forums hosted by the CAW, where Dr. Paul Connett, an anti-incineration activist, was the guest speaker. All the Region's EFW information meetings are conducted by their hired consultants, and have a pro-incineration spin.

If the Region is so sure that an EFW is the best answer for managing our waste, they should be able to defend that decision in an open debate. Only people afraid to defend their position refuse to participate in debates.