

Facilities open up wide to public to avoid misconceptions

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DURHAM -- "Always tell the truth and nothing but the truth and don't try to hide anything" -- that was the message delivered by Gunilla Carlsson to Durham and York regions delegates.

Ms. Carlsson is the public relations manager of the Sysav energy-from-waste facility in Malmo, Sweden. She stressed to the delegates, who visited the facility May 19, that transparency is paramount in running a sometimes-controversial incinerator.

The crux of public acceptance of incineration lies in community involvement and education -- a sentiment echoed by the people who run similar energy-from-waste facilities in the Netherlands, elected officials, civil servants and industry salespeople, all of whom met with the delegation during its week-long educational trip to Europe.

"The buildings were impressive and that was part of their approach," said Cliff Curtis, Durham Region's commissioner of works. "They wanted to be showpieces. They wanted to be available to the public for tours."

The four energy-from-waste facilities visited were immaculately kept on the interior, the offices akin to Ikea showrooms, and their exteriors architecturally modern.

"It was set up so they were a pleasure to be in," Mr. Curtis said. "They did not look like traditional waste-treatment facilities."

The trip, made by political representatives from Durham and York as well as Durham public works staff, was motivated not only by the technology. The delegation also delved into learning how the facilities were integrated into the community and how the process was presented to the public.

"We use a lot of energy to inform about what we do and also how this system works," Jonas Eek said.

Mr. Eek, manager of the Sysav facility's energy department, explained each year the facility awards a scholarship to a young person who is studying waste management.

Area school children and college students make regular field trips to the facility, which helps in educating the public about the technology behind incineration.

"In Sweden, 60 per cent of the population knows that the waste is burned, but only 10 per cent know that it is incinerated. How we burn the waste and incinerate they don't know." Ms. Carlsson said. "If you have seen the facility you are often very positive of how we are doing it."

On the grounds of the Malmo landfill some swallows decided to make a home in an embankment. Instead of kicking the birds out, the people at Sysav built an interpretive centre in the middle of the landfill for bird watchers. There are geese and ducks and swallows, but rarely are seagulls seen.

Similarly, in Amsterdam, Dr. Evelien Jonkhot said public perception is key.

"Communicate open and clear from the start," Dr. Jonkhot said. "Take sufficient time to establish community relations."

The facility makes strides towards education through its in-school program developed with the Natural Environmental Education Centre in Amsterdam and facilitated by Marit Jekkers.

They have a box of instructional material, on how to reduce and reuse, for grade-school children.

“They make a music show using all waste material and it teaches them how to look at waste differently,” Ms. Jekkers said. “To teach children is very important because they can go to their parents and tell them you have to take care of the environment.”

In an effort to include the entire community, the Alkmaar facility holds an open house every year, when the public is invited to learn about energy-from-waste technology.

In addition, all the area schools make regular field trips to the plant. In fact, it has an educational room with interactive learning tools and a classroom.

They have a staff of 11 tour guides and welcome 13,000 visitors annually.

“We keep getting more and more visitors every year,” explained Caroline deLeon, a facility tour guide.

They hold contests among the children who visit to make art out of garbage and the mayor is among the panel of judges.

“What I found particularly impressive was that they were actually involving the children in projects like artwork, creating things from recycled material, and the facilities were well-integrated into the community.” Mr. Curtis said.

Durham has made strides towards public involvement. The public was invited to information meetings on May 9 to 11. Following the meetings, anyone who wished was invited to make a delegation to the Joint Waste Management Committee on May 17.

Beyond public involvement, prior to the decision being made, Mr. Curtis said should Durham or York build a waste-to-energy facility, efforts will be made to emulate the educational strides taken in Europe.

“I think we have to reach out to the community with whatever we do, particularly the young people. We would like to run school tours so we can get them involved with what is going on,” Mr. Curtis said. “Because we think we have a plan that is worthwhile and should be endorsed.”