

Lies, damned lies and statistics?

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By Jennifer Stone



If you take the 74 per cent of people an Ipsos survey says “strongly” or “somewhat” support construction of an incinerator in Clarington without consideration of the 66 per cent who said they’d never heard anything about the idea, this quote from 19th Century poet Andrew Lang might apply to you.

“He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lampposts -- for support rather than illumination.”

The survey talked to 200 people in each of Durham and York regions to gauge awareness of and support for construction of the controversial incinerator. Of the 400 people surveyed in the two municipalities, which have a combined population of over 1.4 million, there was a stunning lack of awareness about the proposal. The plan would see residual waste somehow “thermally treated” -- like, burned -- at a facility which would cost taxpayers \$250 million and be built near Courtice Road and Hwy. 401.

There’s irony in the 400. It’s the same number of Clarington -- population, approximately 80,000 -- residents who were polled last year, with the vast majority supporting a Municipal contribution for a hospital expansion. That poll was ignored by Clarington council which refused the request for a \$2-million donation.

Despite the potential impacts, only 43 per cent of Durham residents and 24 per cent of York residents surveyed had one warm clue about the proposal.

I can forgive York residents. It’s been clear to many for years, clearer yet since the shortlist of sites which included four locations in Clarington as well as a token spot in York Region that, should this thing go ahead, it’ll be in Durham. Not only that, but York has reduced its commitment to construction and feeding garbage to the facility to 12 per cent. So here in Durham, we’re on the hook for a lot more of those dollars.

For more than half of those surveyed here to claim to know nothing of the project is inexcusable. This will impact you financially at least. If you listen to opponents of the plan, your pocketbook will be the least of your worries. The opponents -- a group that includes quite a number of the area’s physicians -- claim the potential for significant health and environmental impacts.

At the same time the Ipsos poll said 76 per cent of Durham respondents and 74 per cent of York residents surveyed said they either “strongly” or “somewhat” agree with “building a thermal facility -- for example, an incinerator or gasification plant in Durham or York to process the waste left over after recycling and composting.”

But remember that only a third of that 75 per cent had even heard of the idea before. One has to wonder how a group of people who had read both the pro and con sides' reasoning would have responded.

Would it have changed the answer? It's hard to say. But the 75 per cent support really needs to be taken with the rather large grain of salt that is the 66 per cent of people who claimed ignorance of the project.

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