

Halifax trip a political pander

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Regional councillors will pack their bags and head for Halifax on Friday to look at a stabilized landfill. So far, 12 have signed up to visit the Otter Lake Stabilized Landfill, the only one of its kind in North America.

Throw in five staff members and the cost of the trip is roughly \$21,000.

But the truth is the trip is less a fact-finding mission than a pander to those who keep suggesting stabilized landfill is an alternative to incineration. Some councillors are almost gleeful about the opportunity to show their colleagues it's just not an option for Durham.

How can it be anything else when council has a clear policy of no new landfills in Durham?

Hypothetically, Durham could choose to pursue stabilized landfill in an outside community. However, it would be impossible to find a community in Ontario willing to welcome our waste with open arms.

Add to that the lengthy process to site, purchase and conduct an environmental assessment on a landfill (at least five years) and Durham's looking at a decade before any such landfill would open.

At the same time, the Region has spent millions and years on the environmental assessment for energy-from-waste and is now in the home stretch.

For those that genuinely want to investigate the option, here's some food for thought.

Of the 155,000 tonnes of waste sent to the Otter Lake facility, all but 20,000 tonnes ends up in the landfill anyway. That's because most recyclables, outside of metals, that end up at Otter Lake are too contaminated to be recycled. When it comes to composting, the organic material is too contaminated with metals to be used in gardens.

As in Durham, officials in Halifax know the best way to divert waste is to do it at the source before it ever gets into a garbage bag. This means putting recyclables into a blue box and organics into a green bin. Initiatives like clear garbage bags and a strict waste bylaw will work towards that.

Advocates of the Halifax solution should note these words from the municipality's website on it's 60 per cent waste diversion rate, a goal set in 1996:

"While we've been close, we have yet to reach our 60 per cent target. In fact we seem to have reached a plateau and have hovered around the 55 per cent mark for several years."

Durham's goal is 70 per cent waste diversion by 2010. Whitby, the Region's best, is currently at 61 per cent.

There's no arguing that stabilized landfill is better than a regular landfill, but it's still not perfect. The biggest problem in landfills is organics, such as kitchen waste, because as they decompose, they produce methane, a greenhouse gas which is many times more harmful than carbon dioxide. They also liquefy, creating leachate that can seep out of the landfill if it has leaks, contaminating the soil and the ground water.

Even with a costly mechanical separating system and bio-stabilization aimed at decomposing biodegradables, the Halifax facility still needs to collect methane and leachate, meaning organics are still in the system.

Region staff could have easily written a report on why stabilized landfill is not a realistic option for Durham, but it's likely that those opposed to incineration wouldn't have believed it. Never mind that \$21,000 could have been better spent in a thousand different ways, it seems saying, "I told you so" or "I have to see it to believe it" is more important for some Regional councillors.