

Durham gives go-ahead to burn its trash

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Durham Region's controversial garbage incinerator is a go.

Six years in the planning, the \$272 million facility got the green light from regional council in a 16-7 vote following an all-day meeting Tuesday.

The approval of a co-owners' agreement with York Region, which is a 21 per cent partner in the project, means construction of the GTA's first incinerator in 20 years can begin this fall.

The energy-from-waste facility, which will burn up to 140,000 tonnes of Durham and York's trash a year, will be built and operated by Covanta Energy Corp. in Clarington. Construction will take three years.

Tuesday's decision in front of 50 spectators followed residents' fears that air pollution will jeopardize human health and experts' reassurances that it won't.

A new study of particulate matter, or "invisible dust," shows there will be no increased health risk from air emissions over the short or long term, said consultant Christopher Ollson, who's been involved with the project since the start.

While air pollution is blamed for thousands of premature deaths in Canada each year, the incinerator's contribution to the problem would be "very small," said Dr. Ray Copes, who did a medical review of emissions data.

"I wouldn't expect a single premature death in a year," said Copes, director of environmental and occupational health for Public Health Ontario.

But councillors who have long opposed incineration weren't convinced. "We're talking about maybe one death," said John Neal. "Well, who wants to stand up in this room and be that one death?"

Newcastle resident Wendy Bracken argued that Copes miscalculated the mortality rate because he didn't multiply his figures by 30 years of operation. In reality, between three and 18 people per million will die prematurely, she said.

Another longtime critic, Linda Gasser, warned that “burning garbage is the riskiest and most expensive option there is.” Emission monitoring plans fall far short of commitments made by the previous council, she said.

Some councillors are “turncoats” who have reversed their position on the incinerator since last fall’s election, charged environmental advocate Doug Anderson. “You’ve sold out your constituents.”

Anderson, president of the organization DurhamCLEAR, has started legal action over the site’s zoning, which he says doesn’t permit an incinerator.

As debate dragged on, regional chair Roger Anderson warned council that delays could cost Durham millions. If Covanta can’t begin building this year, the agreed price tag goes out the window, staff said.

But Durham resident Bob Almack made a last-ditch attempt to halt the project with a video on state-of-the-art plastic recycling in other countries.

“Burning plastic is obsolete. The potential for this is huge,” he said, urging council to investigate turning trash into lucrative plastic pellets.