

Incineration on list of 'solutions' - York, Durham to consider it

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Incineration used to be a dirty word in Ontario, but the idea of burning garbage is taking on new life in an era when exporting trash to the United States is increasingly risky, local resistance to landfills is at an all-time high and energy shortages loom.

Municipal staff in the regions of York and Durham are expected go before the regions' works committees tomorrow to recommend a "thermal solution" as an alternative to hauling tonnes of trash south of the border.

If the recommendation is accepted, if a site can be found and if the province's environmental assessment proceeds expeditiously -- all big ifs -- 300,000 tonnes of garbage every year from Markham, Richmond Hill, Aurora, Vaughan, Newmarket, Ajax, Pickering, Oshawa and Whitby could be disposed of in an energy-from-waste plant by 2011.

"There just isn't a sustainable landfill option available to us right now," said Andrew Campbell, York Region's director of waste management. "We're seeing 70% to 80% acceptance [of an energy-from-waste plant] at this point."

York and Durham have pursued it more aggressively than any other jurisdiction, but they aren't alone in considering a "thermal solution" -- 21st-century jargon for a trio of options. The first and most widely used, particularly in European countries such as Sweden, is the incineration of garbage to produce heat energy. Currently, Ontario's only residential garbage incinerator is operated in Brampton by Algonquin Power. The facility, opened in 1992, burns about 150,000 tonnes of garbage annually, generates electricity for about 5,000 homes and has emissions consistently below the limits set by the provincial environment ministry.

Less proven is gasification, a process that involves "cooking" garbage at high temperatures to produce gas and pyrolysis, an oxygen-free heat process that results in a liquid fuel.

The city of Toronto, which since 2000 has shipped about 950,000 tonnes of garbage a year to the United States, is evaluating alternatives, including incineration -- a process that took on added urgency last week when a Michigan landfill announced that as of Aug. 1, it will no longer accept 160,000 tonnes per year of treated sewage sludge from the city.

A consultant's report to Hamilton and Niagara Region recently recommended a thermal process. Ottawa and Southgate Township in rural Grey County are looking at pilot gasification projects. The Ontario Association of Municipalities will offer an energy-from-waste session at its annual conference this summer. And a steady stream of European experts are doing the rounds.

"The debate you are having is something we had in the early 1980s," says Peter Ohlander, the development manager for one of the world's most advanced energy-from-waste plants. Located in Linköping, Sweden, about two hours from Stockholm, the municipally owned Tekniska Verken plant burns about 350,000 tonnes of garbage per year, generating electricity and enough steam heat for 60,000 homes.

"Today in Sweden we have 26 energy-from-waste plants, the most incinerators in the European Union," said Mr. Ohlander, who last spring met with officials in Ottawa, Markham, Toronto, Hamilton and Niagara Region.



CREDIT: Peter Redman, National Post

The Brampton garbage incinerator, the only one of its kind in Ontario, generates power for about 5,000 homes.