

Monday, July 30, 2007
MoreNotesFrom Underground

Fisking the Garbage Burners

There's [an article in the Toronto Star](#) about how Durham Region is planning on constructing a new incinerator to deal with its trash. This article is somewhat typical of the sort of gentle handling that incineration proposals get these days:

Despite skepticism and some opposition, Durham Region is deeply committed to building the GTA's first garbage incinerator in 15 years, says the region's works commissioner.

"Years ago, there was a fundamental commitment by Durham Region that there would be no new landfills established (here)," says Cliff Curtis. "And council seems to have bought into the concept that we need to look after our own waste."

In other words, because of two self-imposed, artificial constraints, Durham will build an incinerator. It's amazing what can happen when you have a solution that simply needs a problem to be more narrowly defined.

That seems to be a unique position in the GTA, where disposing of trash in one's own backyard tends to stink politically.

In case you haven't noticed, the GTA is rapidly filling up with people. Areas that were once thought to be "out in the country" turn in subdivisions with alarming rapidity.

Sustainable self-sufficiency, with acceptance of some risk, is a goal other regions seem to be avoiding. Toronto and Peel have signed long-term deals to use landfills outside the GTA, though Peel already incinerates half its waste. York plans to turn some of its garbage into pellets to be burned somewhere else. For the time being, Halton has decided to continue to use a Milton landfill.

Good grief, this part could have been written by the incinerator lobby itself. What do terms like "Sustainable self-sufficiency" and "some risk" even mean in this context? If we drove dump trucks down to Toronto Harbour and simply dumped the trash in the harbour, would that be "self-sufficient" with "some risk?"

After the province promised Michigan legislators that Ontario would stop shipping garbage to landfills in the state by 2010, councils across the GTA scrambled to find alternatives.

Most have taken a step back from incineration, long fraught with concerns about emissions.

I don't think many of them even took a step towards incineration.

Halton Region decided to defer considering an energy-from-waste incinerator for five years.

Peel signed a long-term deal with a landfill near Sarnia for half of its trash, despite the fact its Algonquin Power plant in Brampton, built in 1992, already burns almost 140,000 tonnes of garbage a year and is undergoing a retrofit so it can dispose of more.

C'mon Peel Region! What a bunch of pussies, burn all the garbage you can! Burn it!

York signed a deal with a Vaughan company to produce burnable pellets compressed from garbage, while reducing its stake in the joint incinerator project with Durham. Toronto shut down its polluting Commissioners St. incinerator in 1988, and Mayor David Miller has dismissed considering another.

Should we construe the line about the "polluting Commissioners St. incinerator" to mean that there are incinerators that put out no pollution whatsoever? Nice dichotomy construction there, Bad Old Incinerators vs New Good Incinerators.

Incinerators are criticized in part because they need a constant stream of garbage to be economically viable. Environmentalists argue that runs counter to efforts to reduce and recycle, principles to which every GTA region has committed itself.

Incinerators are also viewed as a health hazard. But don't say that to the Durham politicians who recently returned from Europe, wowed by advances in incineration technology and how people and smokestacks live cheek-by-jowl, apparently without conflict or fear. "I have a high level of confidence in (incineration)," said Durham Councillor Howie Herrema.

I love this line about incinerators: The ones in "Europe" are super! Europe is a pretty big place. I love how they always say "Europe" without mentioning a country, a region, a city, or a neighbourhood. Where in Europe, Howie? Why don't you tell us so this information could be independently verified. I can only assume that Councillor Herrema checked this out on the Durham taxpayers' dime and yet couldn't deliver beyond saying that things are fine in "Europe." Incidentally, I feel I should note that people live "cheek-by-jowl" with expressways in Toronto. I don't think that tidbit should be used to conclude that cars are a "clean" technology.

For Curtis, the decision by Toronto to buy the Green Lane landfill site near London, Ont., is a short-term solution. "We are just filling up holes in the ground and eventually we will run out of holes."

Maybe in the 15-20 years that Green Lane will last for Toronto, we will find ways to divert waste that don't involve setting it on fire.

York Region was supposed to have been a 50-50 partner with Durham in the joint incinerator project. Its recent decision to slash that involvement brought temporary hope to critics that the plan was dead. Not so, insists Curtis.

"We are still proceeding with the environmental assessment (for the incinerator). The preliminary business case we ran shows it will work even if Durham has to go alone."

It has been scaled down a bit, though. Original plans called for a plant capable of burning more than 250,000 tonnes a year. It's now 200,000 tonnes, Curtis said.

But if the tender call for the plant goes out by year's end as planned, it should be ready around 2011.

The trash stream that was supposed to come from York will be replaced in part by garbage generated by population growth in Durham and neighbouring municipalities such as Peterborough and Northumberland County, which have expressed interest in using it. And there's nothing to prevent York from increasing the amount it wishes to send to the Durham plant in years to come, Curtis said.

Rod Muir, of the Sierra Club of Canada, is skeptical as to whether the plant will be built. "I think politicians (in Durham) for the last three or four years have been kidding themselves if they think (finding a site for an incinerator) will be easier than finding landfill," he said.

Four of the five proposed sites are in Clarington, with a fifth in East Gwillimbury.

Opposition has been slowly growing in Clarington, already home to a nuclear reactor, and East Gwillimbury's council has said they don't want it.

What's wrong Durham, why doesn't anyone want your incinerator? Some people somewhere in Europe are said to live next to them! What more could you possibly want?

But even though Durham appears to be going it alone for now in championing incineration, it may yet find itself in good company.

Good company? Who?

Niagara Region and Hamilton have talked of building a joint incinerator, though Niagara has backed away from permitting one within its borders. And Rob Rivers, Halton Region's director of waste management, explains that his region's decision to defer incineration plans doesn't preclude a change of heart five years down the road.

I have to be honest, Durham, those don't exactly sound like ringing endorsements. One region won't permit incineration inside its borders and the other won't even talk about it for five years.

Toronto may someday find itself ringed by incinerators, even as its trash trucks rumble down Highway 401 toward Green Lane.

Given that Durham does not "ring" Toronto, I doubt that.

I'm sorry, but I guess I'm still cynical about this supposedly great new technology. Once again, who are these Europeans everyone talks about? Can you tell us, so that we may look into their love affair with incineration for ourselves? From time to time some Toronto politicians will talk about incineration (actually they usually slough it off as "new technologies") but none of them, to my knowledge, has ever said where they would put one.