

Durham plays 'willing host' to incinerator

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Hardly anyone in the happy family of satellite governments orbiting Toronto dares take a bite of the unusual new dish laid out before them. It looks tempting but smells funny -- and could even be poisonous.

Despite having come to the table with such enthusiasm, the regions of Halton, Niagara and York are now pushing away their helpings and slinking off. Nobody wants to be the first to eat "thermally treated" garbage, even though everybody says it's really yummy. What to do?

I know. Give it to Roger [Anderson, chairman of Durham Region]. He'll eat anything!

It's sad to see communities compete to do other people's dirty work -- the so-called willing hosts, their hospitality often compelled by economic stagnation -- but Mr. Anderson's Durham is one of them. An incinerator will fit well among the heavily polluting factories and nuclear reactors that adorn Lake Ontario east of Toronto. Here, waterfront is still seen as a handy dumping ground.

When they were still partners, York and Durham together searched an area the size of Prince Edward Island to find the best sites to burn garbage, and five of the six they picked were clustered on the lakeshore east of Oshawa -- two of them in allegedly protected greenbelts. That says everything you need to know about the environmental assessment that is hastening the further despoliation of Lake Ontario.

But York lacked the gumption even for that sweet deal -- the chance to dump all on Durham -- and backed out of its partnership, just as Niagara backed away from Hamilton and Halton abandoned its plan to build an incinerator. They came to their senses, realizing they can manage their waste effectively without having to build a potentially hazardous megaproject with uncertain revenue projections.

It isn't just environmental concern that's causing them to balk, it's the unpalatable prospect of "put or pay" -- the obligation either to supply a certain amount of garbage to a facility or to pay the full amount of doing so in the event that there isn't enough garbage to supply. With comparatively cheap landfill space readily available in Southern Ontario - and popular recycling programs steadily reducing the supply of burnable garbage - that hook becomes huge.

Several U.S. jurisdictions that rushed to build incinerators in response to their own phony crisis paid big penalties when the garbage failed to appear at the non-competitive facilities. Toronto's refusal to provide minimum tonnage is the only reason its garbage went to Michigan instead of Northern Ontario seven years ago.

But Durham knows better. In response to York's decision to drop out, which essentially destroyed the project's already shaky business plan, Durham council voted to consider "over-sizing" the proposed incinerator "beyond the immediate needs of the two regions."

At least they've abandoned all that blather about disappearing landfills, which was the original rationale for building incinerators. The Durhams are being frank about the fact that they have no actual need for their pet megaproject - although why they think others will need it, and therefore help pay for it, is a mystery. The bigger mystery is how any half-awake citizenry could permit its government to embark on such reckless speculation.

There was only a handful of people gathered at Bowmanville Town Hall yesterday to protest the latest irregularity in the process to railroad an incinerator onto the local waterfront. No more showed up last month to see Mayor Jim Abernethy's reassuring German-language slide show after he and about a dozen other Durhamites returned from a lovely junket to Europe, where they witnessed the latest sexy garbage burners in action.

Of such ingredients are "willing hosts" made.

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