

## **Uxbridge smokes out new policy**

### **Durham residents get heated about barrel burning**

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By Jeff Hayward

UXBRIDGE -- A new policy is in effect in Uxbridge to smoke out any potential problems that may arise from burning in barrels.

And although Uxbridge Fire Chief Scott Richardson said the policy wasn't a response to complaints from residents about barrel burning in the township, others around Durham are voicing their concerns about the outdoor blaze bins.

Dave Bulmer lived in Ajax for decades, and decided to move out to rural Tyrone about five years ago to get away from urban air pollution.

But fresh country air was nowhere to be found.

"We've got people burning garbage, we've got huge campfires and bonfires, people use those chimineas, it's so much smoke," he says. "I'm worse off here than I was in Ajax, now I use inhalers."

He says there is the perception that if you live in the country, on a large property, it's OK to burn anything, any time. His complaints to neighbours have ostracized him, and now he worries he'll have to move again.

"I've become a pariah in my community because I complain about it, but this is like cigarette smoking. At one point it was acceptable but now we're learning about the health risks."

The Uxbridge Fire Department enacted its barrel burning policy Jan. 1 of this year.

Chief Richardson noted, "I wouldn't say there's a lot of complaints (about barrel burning in Uxbridge). But there's a number of people that still use these barrels... it was in our best interest (to create the bylaw)." He said residents can burn in a barrel or approved appliance no larger than 200 litres without a permit, but must call 905-852-9038 first to determine if burning is allowable that day.

The purpose of a burn barrel is to dispose of yard waste such as tree limbs, said the chief. The fire department can snuff out a barrel fire that is potentially hazardous, and hefty fines could also apply in those cases, he added.

Under the new bylaw, there are now minimum setbacks from property lines for a burn barrel to be permitted in Uxbridge, Chief Richardson noted. "In town, very few properties would comply," he said.

Permits, at a cost, are required for open-air fires in Uxbridge.

Meanwhile, Pickering environmentalist John Newell is also taking up the fight.

He is amazed people are easily turned off by the prospect of burning garbage in an incinerator, but seem indifferent to "barrel burning", the practice of burning household garbage and other materials in 55-gallon steel drums.

Burning garbage in barrels or pits dug in the ground is a long-standing practice that still occurs on some farms and rural properties in Durham, despite the fact all municipalities in the region have bylaws prohibiting it.

Most municipalities in Durham allow open air burns by permit, but they are limited to a few specific materials.

For example, Clarington grants burn permits for trees and brush, if residents live on 10 acres or more and outside a designated urban area.

In Whitby, residents outside the major urban area can obtain a \$50 permit to burn tree trimmings and branches, but not leaves, grass or garbage. Scugog requires 50 feet of space around an open air burn, and only wood and wood by-products can go in.

But Mr. Newell says people still burn garbage.

"I don't think people get up in the morning and say 'I'm going to poison people.' They just think they're getting rid of their garbage," he says. "But it's very dangerous. There are so many poisons and chemicals released into the air and that smoke can infiltrate other people's homes."

He is urging municipalities to introduce more aggressive bylaws combined with public education to make people aware of the potential danger to themselves and their neighbours.

It's a move north Oshawa resident Lawrence Hamer would welcome.

As of late, he has been devoting his attention to fighting the proposed Clarington incinerator, but says burn barrels will become his next crusade -- one he hopes other environmentally-conscious residents will join.

Mr. Hamer grew up in various rural areas of Durham and says the practice of burning garbage has decreased in recent years, but still occurs enough to worry him.

"Sometimes it's just wood and whatever from the yard, but sometimes you can see from the colour of the smoke and the smell, that people are burning plastic and garbage. Even on big properties, that smoke travels," he says. "That has to be a lot worse than an incinerator."

According to 2004 statistics from Environment Canada, roughly one in four Ontarians use burn barrels on a regular basis at their home or cottage. Those numbers haven't been updated in recent years.

Many American communities have moved to ban open air burns completely and in August 2007, Loyalist Township in Ontario became one of the first in the province to follow suit.

-- with files from By Jillian Follert