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Bracken vows to keep fighting

While she had a good idea what the final vote would be going into last Wednesday's Regional Council meeting, Newcastle's Wendy Bracken said she still hoped that some councillors would change their mind. Regional council voted 16 to 12 in favour of building an incinerator in Courtice, to burn the Region's residual household garbage.

"I think on every level, it was the wrong decision," Bracken told the Orono Times last Friday. "I really feel they [the Region] have left us wide open for so many problems."

Bracken was one of about twenty individuals who spent the last two years fighting against the Region's proposed energy from waste (EFW) project. Incineration sounds good at first, Bracken said, "At least you are getting something good when you are creating energy from burning waste."

The health and environmental concerns were the big issues for Bracken. "An EFW is a little chemical factory, creating toxins," Bracken said.

Being slightly asthmatic, Bracken says she is concerned for her health and the health of her children. Children are most at risk from the cumulative effects of toxic emissions, the kind released from an incinerator, according to Bracken. The air quality here is already compromised, and adding emissions from an incinerator will only make it worse, she says. On a smoggy day, Bracken says when she goes up to Port Perry to visit her family she can notice a big difference, "I'm breathing better."

She remembers reading some articles leading up to the first public information session, in May 2007, that made EFW sound "too good to be true," Bracken said. "EFW sounds like at least some good can come from burning waste."

At that first public information session, Bracken said she was struck by how few details were provided. "The comment I heard, that it was mostly water vapour coming from the stack, set off the alarm bell." With her degree in science, Bracken said she knew that statement was misleading. When she asked questions, the consultant, hired by the Region of Durham to take them through the environmental assessment process "tried to brush me off," she said. She was told the EFW would be something close to a smelter, or a cement kiln. "He didn't give me details, he didn't have emissions data," Bracken said. "It is strange; the proponent for the facility didn't know what the emissions were."

Never having attended a municipal council meeting prior to the EFW issue, she began going to every public information session, and she spoke at numerous local and regional council meetings. There was about half a dozen people who worked really hard, reading all the reports, doing research, attending meetings, she said. "It was a full time job." It was impossible to get through the mountain of material released in the past month, according to Bracken. The rushed time lines in the end made it impossible. "How can you expect a good decision when people haven't been given enough time to read the material? It is unjust, you slug it out, you're working hard, but you can't get through it," she said.

"I was naive and thought that decisions would be made more thoughtfully," Bracken said. Having watched the process and hearing some of the questions councillors asked, Bracken says she is sure some councillors did not read all the reports. "I really see how important it is for the public to keep an eye on things. "I have learned a lot by watching this process unfold."

I have watched some councillors pay more attention to the consultants, than their citizen concerns. "That's a bit backwards, she said. "As a councillor, you represent citizens, you have to listen to citizen concerns and follow up with the consultants.

Bracken says she believes there are major holes in the environmental assessment. She has raised these concerns on numerous occasions in public delegations to Regional and Local Councillors. Among her list of concerns is the fact that there will be no continuous monitoring for heavy metals, particulate matter and organic pollutants, what she calls the "Big 3." Tonnes of heavy metals; lead, mercury cadmium and others will be emitted to the air over the 25 - 30 year life of the facility, according to Bracken. "Approve this and you approve those large quantities of metals being added to our environment where they will persist," she told Regional Councillors on Wednesday.

The fact that Clarington's councillors could have stopped the incinerator by voting against it on Wednesday, is devastating said Bracken. Though she regrets the outcome of the final vote, Bracken said she has learned a lot through the process, and has met some really good people. Her other regret is that she didn't get involved earlier in the process. The Region screened out zero waste before it was even considered, Bracken said, and she didn't get involved until after the Region decided to use thermal treatment as their preferred waste management option. "The ads at the beginning of the process were very misleading," Bracken said. "They said, 'Come talk to us about what to do with our garbage', they didn't say we are considering incineration."

In June 2006, Regional Council endorsed EFW as the preferred technology for waste management. Bracken says if she had known the Region was considering incineration at that time, she would have acted then. Councillors were given a sales pitch at the beginning, according to Bracken. Oshawa councillor April Cullen told Bracken she voted in favor of thermal treatment because she thought most, Public Works, Cliff Curtis, was quoted say, "The air coming out of the facility would be cleaner than the air going in."

"Because you know it is so wrong, you have to keep going," Bracken said. The anti incineration group vow not to give up fighting against the proposed EFW. The Region will submit the final environmental assessment report to the Ministry of Environment on July 31st, at which time the group of opponents will bring their fight to the provincial level.