

Turning waste into energy beats landfilling

By Christopher Hume
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It's time for opponents to incineration -- led in Toronto by Mayor David Miller and his NDP cohorts -- to wake up and smell the garbage.

Despite objections to incineration, or as they call it in Europe, "waste-to-energy," this is a technology that is needed.

Objections to it are based on information that's 30 years out of date.

And even if criticisms by Miller and other opponents were justified, the fact remains that dumping garbage in a landfill site is far more environmentally destructive, damaging and disgusting than incineration.

Throughout the Toronto mayoral campaign, Miller talked about incineration as if it were some kind of giant open-pit conflagration spewing toxic filth into the atmosphere.

Only one thing wrong with that picture: it describes landfill, where spontaneous combustion occurs regularly, not incineration.

Miller and others also refer to incineration as a source of dioxins, and they're right. But let's put things in perspective. In Sweden, which has 30 incineration plants, the total amount of dioxins released this year is 0.7 gram. And that's for the entire country.

If Miller seriously believes that the landfills throughout Ontario and Michigan release fewer dioxins than that, he needs to hire better advisers.

Opponents should travel to Europe to see for themselves how a state-of-the-art incinerator works. One thing they would see immediately is that two-thirds of each plant is devoted to filters, scrubbers and the machinery of emission cleaning.

They would also discover that European Union emission standards are much more stringent than anything we have in Canada. In addition, the EU and local governments levy heavy taxes on landfill to discourage exactly the kind of approach Miller advocates.

The second argument against incineration is expense. According to Miller, we can't afford it. Building such a plant would cost lots, perhaps \$300 million. But what Miller and others fail to understand is that energy-to-waste plants generate heat and electricity,



This incinerator in Malmo, Sweden, supplies electricity and heat for the city.

both of which can be sold to consumers to make money. The operations in Sweden actually turn a profit. The break-even point would be 10 to 20 years.

Miller also complains that incineration discourages recycling. This is nonsense; there's no evidence that people reduce, reuse or recycle any less because of incineration than they do because of landfill. Indeed, both Swedes and Canadians recycle approximately 40 per cent of household waste. Here the remaining 60 per cent goes into the ground; in Sweden it's burned.

Naturally, recycling is the preferred option; that goes without saying. But this is true regardless of whether we're talking about landfill or incineration.

Miller counters supporters of incineration by asking whether they'd be willing to see a plant in their ward. This is an unworthy argument and the mayor knows it. One wonders how they'd respond if a landfill site were proposed.

Critics might also be interested to learn that when incineration was introduced in Sweden in the 1970s, it wasn't popular. The outcry was loud and long, but three decades later, Swedes have changed their minds. Now when new plants are built and existing ones enlarged, it happens without controversy.

But as Hakan Rylander, president of Sysav, the largest waste disposal company in southern Sweden, points out: "The politicians here had the guts to say there must be a waste-to-energy plant back in the early '70s. That's very important. It wasn't popular at the beginning, but people have seen that it works."

The truth is that fear of incineration has more to do with lack of political will than pollution. The arguments against are a smokescreen; the burning issue here is lack of leadership.

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