

Water thrown on garbage burning plan

Metro Vancouver holds off on including waste-to-energy incinerators in new regional solid waste strategy

By Sandor Gyarmati, The Delta Optimist February 6, 2010

The future of the region's garbage is even more muddled following a recent decision by Metro Vancouver to hold off the inclusion of incinerators as part of a new regional solid waste plan.

At a special meeting last month it was agreed further consultation is needed with the province, delaying a vote on recommendations that include the region retaining its 70 per cent waste diversion target by 2015 as well as revising the solid waste plan to indicate a preference for waste-to-energy located within the region, "without precluding the possibility of out-of-region solutions."

A staff report states Metro Vancouver's current annual waste generation stands at 2.7 million tonnes, a number projected to increase to five million by 2020. The report also notes the one waste-to-energy facility operating in Burnaby has a fixed capacity, while the Vancouver Landfill in East Ladner is subject to a tri-partite agreement limiting the amount of waste that can go there. The landfill in Cache Creek, where Lower Mainland garbage is also sent, is nearing capacity.

Mayor Lois Jackson, who chairs the Metro Vancouver board, recently told the Optimist she's frustrated by the slow pace of devising a new solid waste plan. Originally, Metro had looked at building a landfill in Ashcroft before native objections scuttled that idea.

Waste-to-energy then came to the forefront and was seen by the region as a solution to meet the lofty waste diversion target, while at the same time generating power.

Metro was looking at building as many as six plants, while a private company has approached the Tsawwassen First Nation about constructing a waste-to-energy facility on the reserve.

Delta South MLA Vicki Huntington said the waste-to-energy issue, however, is now as confused as ever.

"It is muddled. I don't know who's got the authority for it, whether the province has to licence incinerators and where the science stands, which interests me the most," said Huntington.

Delta North MLA Guy Gentner said there's growing opposition to the Metro plan to build waste-to-energy plants.

"I'm wondering if Metro will be allowed to do this without a buy-in from their friends downwind to the east of Surrey," said Gentner.

Abbotsford Coun. Patricia Ross, who chairs the Fraser Valley Regional District, appeared on Gentner's Internet radio show recently to express opposition to the Metro plan, comparing the concerns to the Sumas 2 power project from several years ago.

A representative with the Society Promoting Environmental Conservation (SPEC) was also on the show, saying that depending on what type of incinerator is built, it has the potential to worsen air quality in the Fraser Valley.

According to Abbotsford's engineering department, the primary concern for that city, and the Fraser Valley in general, is the impact on their airshed.

"These facilities have the potential to significantly deteriorate the air quality in the Fraser Valley due to our geographical and meteorological challenges which are quite unique in North America," claims the department.

It's not clear if the provincial government would approve Metro's new solid waste plan or grant an environmental certificate for waste-to-energy plants if the opposition remains in the Fraser Valley.

Huntington, noting at first glance reducing the amount of waste at the landfill at Burns Bog seems like a good idea, until it becomes evident there's not much information about the science of garbage incinerators.

"Where is the science and where is it easy for us laypeople to find and grasp what's good and bad about incinerators? Until I hear it doesn't create a health problem, a pollution problem, then I'm not particularly in favour. I just don't know enough, like the public," said the independent MLA.

"The other thing that concerns me is that it's like the new gold rush. You see all sorts of companies, new and old, rushing into the incineration business, so there's a lot of money at stake, and you have to be worried when that happens if influence overtakes science."

Complicating matters is the provincial government's recent decision to grant an environmental assessment certificate to expand the landfill at Cache Creek, where some of the Lower Mainland's garbage is currently shipped.

Interior native groups are opposed, one of the reasons Jackson said Metro doesn't want to continue to try to dump there.