

Ontario incinerator ban means more landfills

On Nov. 5, Oakland County voters will decide on a ballot proposal to finance the county's proposed solid waste program. This is part of a continuing series on the solid waste program and the controversy it has generated.

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Last April, the Province of Ontario enacted a ban on the construction of future incinerators.

The province's five existing incinerators would be allowed to continue operation. And the waste-to-energy facility under construction near Peel, west of Toronto, would be completed.

But there would be no new incinerators under the governmental policy that would also impose tight restrictions on the waste that could be burned or placed in landfills.

Environmental groups in Oakland County often cite Ontario's decision as the safest approach to handling solid waste. Instead of incinerating the nearly 4,000 tons of municipal waste that county residents generate daily, the county should insist on reducing the flow of refuse and recycle what's left.

One such group, HOPE (Help Oakland Protect the Environment) urges residents to vote against the Nov. 5 ballot issue. If the issue is defeated, say HOPE and others, county officials would likely change course and emulate Ontario and other communities that have rejected incineration.

"We just don't think that's the way to go," explained HOPE member Tara Guel of Rochester Hills.

BUT ONTARIO'S DECISION is merely one area's answer to a problem, responds Roger Smith, deputy director of the county's waste management division. For every area, like Ontario, that bans incineration, there are dozens that see it as a viable option.

As a matter of fact, Smith notes, President George Bush's National Energy Strategy calls for significantly more waste-to-energy facilities once health and environmental concerns are resolved.

Michigan Public Act 209 of 1987, furthermore, dictates a state strategy to encourage recycling and waste-to-energy incinerators, said Smith.

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More reliance on incinerators is predicated on improved technology, Smith said, and their ability to remove dioxins and other hazardous materials from the emissions. "But we're confident we can do that," he said. "Emission standards (for the proposed Auburn Hills incinerator) are the toughest in the country."

Ontario's approach does involve one drawback, admits Joyce I. McLean, policy advisor to province Environmental Minister Ruth Grier. Banning incineration will require more landfills.

"We're facing a crisis," said McLean. "Within four years, 80 landfills will reach capacity and close. We can't say how many new landfills we'll need, but they're preferable to incinerators."

Ontario expects to prolong the lives of existing landfills — and reduce the number needed in the future — by strict restrictions on the kind of refuse that can be burned or landfilled, she said.

Construction wastes, for example, are banned. Pallet and scrap wood that can't be reused must be mulched for landscaping, she said. Organic scrap — food, leaves and grass clippings — must be composted.

Smith and other proponents of Oakland's incinerator acknowledge that the county will need to locate and build six to 10 new landfills if the Nov. 5 ballot is defeated.

"THAT'S ONE REASON I think voters will say 'yes' on Nov. 5," said

county commissioner Roy Rewold, R-Oakland Township, a leading proponent of the county waste program, including the incinerator. "Landfills are a bad alternative."

Another commissioner, Larry Crane, R-Waterford, predicts Oakland's solid waste proposal will pass. Voters in Highland Township, for example, might be inclined to approve the incinerator in Auburn Hills because the alternative could well be a

landfill in their back yards.

The entire ballot proposal boils down to a matter of choice, summarized Smith. "Oakland's waste problem isn't going to go away. It's getting worse."

"Our program calls for reducing the flow of trash by about 50 percent, by recycling and composting. But what do we do with the rest... incinerate it? Or put it in new landfills?"



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clarification

Ash from the proposed Auburn Hills waste-to-energy incinerator will not necessarily go into the county-controlled landfill in Orion Township as stated in Thursday's story on Oakland's solid waste program.

"We really haven't made that decision yet," said Roger Smith, the county's deputy director of solid waste management. "It could go there, but it could also go to any number of sites."

The decision on any ash from Oakland's incinerator will not be taken until after the Nov. 5 vote, Smith said.

Ironically, incinerator ash is generally safer in landfills than municipal waste, he said. "Even so, those landfills are closely monitored."

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