

METRO'S INCINERATION PLAN: OPPOSITION GROWS TO 'LANDFILL IN THE SKY'¹

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Blowing smoke? Even modern waste incinerators such as this one on the Isle of Man in the UK are environmentally controversial

A new song, "Landfill in the Sky," has reverberated through communities from the City of Vancouver to Abbotsford to Hope. This modern day protest tune voices opposition to a waste management concept of incinerating trash. As former Canadian Idol Shane Weibe sings, "Burning garbage makes toxic waste, incineration leaves a bad taste," people are asking what all the fuss is about!

Metro Vancouver's new solid waste management plan has ignited controversy everywhere it has gone for public consultation. The regional district is leaning towards a new and effective way to manage solid waste. At first glance it appears to be a significant step forward in regards to environmental sustainability. Chair of the Fraser Valley Regional District Patricia Ross recently said: "We are happy to support the initiatives in the Metro Vancouver plan to divert waste and increase reduction, reuse and recycling." By increasing the amount of waste diverted away from landfills through recycling and composting, from 55% to 70%, Metro Vancouver has made a forward-thinking decision that puts more focus on waste reduction. The controversy is over what to do with the remaining 30% of our garbage. The Draft Plan includes three possible options for the leftover waste. Metro's favoured option is the construction of a new incinerator, followed by incineration in another location, or continued landfilling.

The Metro Board must determine a solution to an issue that is growing, literally, every year. Developing a solid waste management plan that is sustainable, cost effective, and environmentally conscious is not an easy task. The current program of landfilling is admittedly not the optimal solution - based on emissions of methane gas that are released from that landfill, in addition to chemical leaching of products. In a day and age where the provincial

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government is looking to reduce GHG emissions, it is more than clear that there has to be a better way.

Interestingly enough, environmentalists concerned about climate change have formed their own type of opposition to incineration because the science says that waste-to-energy (WTE) facilities such as the one Metro has proposed, emit more CO₂ per unit of energy produced than a coal-fired power plant. Ben West of the Wilderness Committee calls emissions from energy production the “low hanging fruit” of reducing our carbon footprint. West explains that, “According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, waste incineration releases 1355 g of carbon per KWh vs. 1020 g per KWh for a coal-fired power plant. To put that in perspective natural gas creates 515 g per KWh.” This is information that certainly can’t be ignored in all of the “public consultations” that are being presented around all the communities Metro has visited. In fact, a recent UBC study says “Any new source of combustion in the Lower Mainland, including mass burn waste incineration, is simply not advisable.”

Residents across the Fraser Valley have begun to band together to raise their voice against incineration. I myself have toured a waste to energy facility in Denmark, similar to many of those all over Europe that Metro advisors cite as successful. My experience resulted in skepticism on the topics of emissions, health risks, and economic costs and impacts. My skepticism only grew as I investigated Metro’s draft plan. FVRD Chair Patricia Ross calls the claim of success all over Europe as a “farce.” She says: “There have been bans, calls for bans, and shutdowns. One company, Covanta, has been fined. People are realizing that incinerators haven’t lived up to their promise, but this technology is new to Canada and we are easy targets for the pro-incinerator lobby.”

In many cases, opponents here aren’t even arguing against the case for WTE’s success in Europe. They are saying it’s not right for this air shed, being one of the most sensitive in the world. A new website, *Air Quality Matters*, explains that: “Coastal wind patterns and the nature of our geography create a sensitive air shed in the Fraser Valley, particularly susceptible to the build-up of air-borne contaminants.”

Whether it is the Irish Doctors Association highlighting health concerns over the dioxins and nanoparticles that are produced through the incineration process, or the increased threat to the air shed, garbage in Metro Vancouver has been getting heat from Fraser Valley residents. The crisis with DDT is something to think about when we utilize technologies and products without knowing the possible risks. Do we want to wait 20 years to find out that the new particles that we have been breathing in have caused mutations and serious health issues? These particles will also contaminate our prime agricultural land, an important aspect of industry and community in the Fraser Valley. So how beneficial will the Hundred Mile Diet be then? Even Chilliwack school trustees have chosen to openly oppose the plan and write a letter to Metro Vancouver.

At the same time, it isn’t just the health and environmental case that causes a stir with opponents. A recent KPMG study questioned the economics of Metro’s business plan, adding to the chorus of concerns over financial estimates as stated by Abbotsford South MLA John Van Dongen: “I am not convinced by the business case. People at the Vancouver Board of Trade and Surrey Board of Trade do not agree with Metro’s estimates.” Chilliwack MLA John Les spoke at a recent public meeting: “The more I listen, the more I hear, the more skeptical I am becoming.” He criticized Metro in regards to Douw Steyn of UBC, a well known expert on air quality who was fired by the GVRD after opposing incineration. “It seems to me that if you propose a certain solution you ought not to be afraid of a wide ranging and open debate” said Les.

Who is paying for this massive capital investment? The plan includes building a new public utility, and my mother says there are no free lunches. If we actually do reduce our waste beyond the 70% number that Metro has decided on - because the market is already starting to drive change, whether it be biodegradable chip bags or otherwise - we stop using the incinerator once we are dependent on the power? Who, at the end of the day will really profit? John Les ended by saying: "Be very afraid. This could really hit you in the pocketbook."

As Mayor Sharon Gaetz talks of being sold a bill of goods, and the waste management plan points directly to incineration, the other side of the story is finally being told. Effective waste management and positive air quality needs to be maintained in the Fraser Valley. Furthermore, this is not solely a "Valley issue" - it is an issue that Mayor Gaetz warned Metro residents to be very wary of. Gregor Robertson and the City of Vancouver voted unanimously to oppose incineration as a waste management option.

As Metro continues their public consultations, residents of each respective community seem perturbed by incineration, and even more perturbed by Metro's approach. The meetings drag on for hours and are blatantly pro-incineration. It seems a bit of a stretch for Metro to say that they are considering 3 options for the remaining 30% of garbage when their presentation includes a painted picture of a shiny new incinerator in the Regional District. If you want to hear from all the countless individuals who have cited health risks, scientific studies, and cost concerns, you can go and look it up on their website. According to the Abbotsford News, "Patrick Powers, one of the last speakers of the day at the Abbotsford Consultation, sat through four hours of discussions before getting the opportunity to speak. 'If I want to see anything other than your sales pitch, I have to look elsewhere and dig it up,' Powers exclaimed."

The case is clear that a more aggressive goal of waste diversion through composting and recycling needs to be employed. Cities such as San Francisco have committed to being 'zero waste' by 2020. Building an incinerator in Metro Vancouver is a regressive way of dealing with waste. The business case isn't there; the health implications are too unknown; the threat to the Fraser Valley air shed and food quality is too great a price tag to ignore. Metro Vancouver's last public consultation will be held on July 14th, and it is the last opportunity to voice opinions on the Draft Plan before it goes to Environment Minister Barry Penner for approval.