

# north shore news

## Getting down to zero waste

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

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"Health and air quality of 300,000 B.C. residents to deteriorate as Metro Vancouver bulldozes past globally renowned science, consultation with elected officials, and races toward construction of \$500 million incinerator."

-Fraser Valley Regional District media release, Nov. 21, 2013

If anything can be guaranteed about management of the solid waste we put to the curb, it is the unending political theatre it generates. Pro and con voices about waste incineration are raised by regional officials, by Lower Mainland and Interior municipalities and by Nanaimo and peaceful Gabriola Islanders.

Why should the angst burning beyond the bridges matter to North Shore residents? Well, apart from the fact that our garbage is a part of the Metro whole, if a \$500 million incinerator is built and Metro inks a decades-long contract with a corporation that needs an ongoing supply of waste to keep the burner going, where is the incentive to mend our ways? That's not to say the hyperbole from Chilliwack is helpful, or that Gabriola gardens will soon be covered with layers of toxic ash belching over from Duke Point; but if ever there was a time for calm discussion of the facts, it is now.

My own opinions on the topic have swung back and forth like a pendulum in an earthquake.

Until a few weeks ago, the subject seemed simple: a green cart; a blue box; blue and yellow bags, garden trimmings and a smelly bin of compostables to attract the bears we want to repel - a total of six containers plus an occasional visit from the 1-800 guys to find a home for the big stuff, and our garbage is out of sight.

That's it - with the addition of bottle and electronics depots, the garbage and recycling items should end up in their rightful places - so long as we've sorted everything conscientiously and paid taxes to the municipality for the work we've just done.

The subject seemed that straightforward until the furore over privatized recycling erupted to provoke last week's column and the emissions from the groups opposed to incineration gathered steam.

What it seems to boil down to, is that the folks who put their solid waste to curb have reached the tipping point; most embrace the need for recycling and taxes but they sure don't want Metro's waste burning in their backyard.

At first, I sympathized with that position.

Reading on, however, I learned modern-day incinerators can reduce garbage to a harmless ash that becomes inert when added to construction cement mix, and that scrubbers in the chimneystacks release emissions that meet health and safety standards.

Then, just as I'd rationalized that barging garbage to Duke Point was better than thousands of trucks dieseling it to the Cache Creek landfill, and considered the modest revenues from a waste-to-energy incinerator, I learned about failed toxicity tests at the current facility in Burnaby.

Chilliwack Mayor Sharon Gaetz, chairwoman of the Fraser Valley Regional District claims, "A new incinerator will generate 171,000 tonnes of carcinogenic ash a year."

"That is equivalent to 17,100 dump truck loads," Gaetz stated in her November 2013 media release.

So who do we believe?

Gaetz or Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie, chairman of Metro's Zero Waste Committee who said, "independent, scientific studies from around the world confirm that modern, well-managed waste-to-energy facilities are the best choice."

As with any politically charged issue the problem here is one of trust. How can people square Brodie's comment that, "... the Burnaby facility has an excellent performance record.. ." with FVRD claims that Metro's 2013 bottom ash analysis failed 19 times in 479 tests? Some of the most serious failures showed unsafe levels of cadmium, residue from the batteries we use in many of our gadgets. So if we want to see who is at fault for the failures, perhaps we should look in the mirror.

Metro Vancouver data shows that even if we achieve a waste diversion rate of 80 per cent - we are currently at about 58 per cent - there still will be an annual load of 700,000 tonnes of garbage to be processed.

So, maybe, as Cache Creek Mayor John Ranta and Nanaimo Coun. George Anderson suggested to me, "We'd do better to stay the course we're on and use the dollars on striving to reach our zero waste goals."

Metro says it has sent several invitations to FVRD to meet and discuss their differences. But who would fault FVRD for rebuffing those invitations until Metro officials agree to hold the meetings out in the open, instead of behind closed doors.

When the merits or otherwise of spending \$500 million for a new incinerator are at stake, that kind of stalemate is unacceptable.

Omit the corporate competitive information, return to the table - include Nanaimo - and let's have a fact-based discussion out in the open for all to see.

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