

# Editorial: Getting a grip on our garbage

## Growing volume of waste may force rethink on incineration

BY VANCOUVER SUN EDITORIAL, VANCOUVER SUN    OCTOBER 3, 2014



A garbage incinerator in Brescia, Italy.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Files

Nobody likes to be thought of as a garbage factory but — like it or not — that is what cities have always been and will continue to be, despite our sense of sophisticated entitlement. While only the most narrow-minded would dismiss the enormous cultural, social and economic contribution of the city to human development, there is a sobering reminder of the cost in the fact that we are also perceived as perpetual-motion refuse machines in the surrounding hinterlands to which we increasingly export our rubbish while importing their resources and young people.

In Vancouver, for example, just over 600,000 inhabitants generated 557,334 tonnes of waste last year. Sort that into commercial, demolition and residential waste and it turns out that the average citizen produces about half a tonne of garbage a year. Put another way — because fooling around with dimensional statistics is always fun — some amusing calculations for converting residential waste to volume that were developed in California show Vancouverites produce roughly enough garbage to bury Library Square to the depth of a 37 storey building, which is about four times higher than the present library. Our garbage tower would rank as the 22nd tallest building in the city. That's just for 2013. Add another one, likely taller, each year.

Statistics Canada reports that between 2001 and 2006, population growth in the country's 33 main metropolitan areas grew at a rate which was seven times that for small towns and rural areas. Most Canadians now live in just six of those metropolitan areas — 10 million of us in the regions surrounding Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. And even though there have been dramatic improvements in recapturing both materials for recycling and for energy from the urban garbage stream, the actual volume is obviously going to continue to be a problem with which we must wrestle.

If we are living examples of American writer Mason Cooley's aphorism that human society sustains itself by transforming nature into garbage, it behooves us all to stop thinking about garbage simply as something useless to throw away. Start thinking about it instead as a resource we can exploit for all kinds of added value. In fairness, municipal waste managers, particularly across the Metro Vancouver region but in many other cities, too, have been among the most progressive thinkers in this. They have

launched campaigns urging us to reuse, recycle and repurpose while developing practical and pragmatic ways to extract genuine economic value from the garbage stream.

As a result, we have effective programs for diverting organic waste — from kitchen scraps to lawn cuttings into compost — which can be reinvested in the natural landscape. Across Canada, more than 60 facilities — including here — now recover methane gas from landfills. Not only is gas used to generate energy, the extraction process reduces greenhouse emissions from urban landfills equivalent to almost seven million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. In Edmonton, a new plant converts municipal garbage to cleaner-burning biofuels to further reduce carbon footprints. Others mine discarded computer and electronic parts. And so on.

The success of these strategies has been remarkable. In Vancouver, for example, per capita waste generation has been trending downward with satisfying consistency since 2007. Overall, the diversion rate for municipal waste has improved from 37 per cent in 1994 to almost 60 per cent in 2014.

Not that these developments are without controversy. Here in the Metro Region, for example, passions run high over regional desires to build a high-efficiency incinerator using new technology already deployed in Europe that would extract electricity from waste. Proponents argue that it would contribute to the provincial electricity budget while eliminating about 370,000 tonnes of waste — about 88 per cent of Vancouver's current residential garbage generation — from landfills each year. Opponents say it would degrade airsheds and that enhanced composting and recycling efforts are superior. Vancouver has a ban on burning garbage.

Proponents from both sides marshal sound arguments; both claim the science is on their side and it is; both cite inefficiencies in the other's approach. Foes suggest expanding the capacity to generate power from burning garbage locks us into a mindset of inefficiency, the demand for feedstock for power incinerators encouraging garbage production rather than reduction. Advocates point to a U.S. study across 22 states which found that incineration facilities don't inhibit recycling, that the programs are compatible and even complementary.

Arguments aside, Metro Vancouver's population is projected to grow by about a million over the next quarter century. Ergo, the yield from B.C.'s biggest urban garbage factory is only going to increase. At current rates of per capita waste generation, population growth will add another 530,000 tonnes of waste annually — that would mean two Library Squares of garbage per year.

Perhaps it's time for the city to re-examine its apparently dogmatic anti-burning stance in light of its contribution to the problem; perhaps it's time for incineration enthusiasts to start advocating equally enthusiastically for an integrated approach that even more aggressively re-affirms recycling, methane capture and compost recovery as methods of extracting value.

Not all garbage can be burned; not all garbage can be recycled. But it all must be effectively dealt with if we are to avoid being buried — or burying somebody else — in our own waste.

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