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More burning questions loom on Metro garbage



A load of garbage is hoisted at the Burnaby waste-to-energy plant. Planning work gets underway soon for a possible new Metro Vancouver garbage incinerator.

Evan Seal / The Leader

By [Jeff Nagel - BC Local News](#)

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Metro Vancouver politicians soon face critical choices on how they pursue waste-to-energy incineration now that the province has approved the region's solid waste plan.

A key issue – to be tackled this fall – is whether any new incinerator should be publicly owned and operated or outsourced to a private partner.

A Metro-built facility would mean taxpayers pay directly for it – a price tag that could easily top \$500 million – but the region would be able to sell the energy generated, offsetting much of the ongoing costs and maybe even turn a small profit.

If a private partner instead finances, builds and runs the plant, Metro would avoid up-front costs and the risks of ownership but sign a long-term garbage-supply contract. The region would pay per-tonne garbage disposal fees, which would cover not just the construction and operating costs but also the partner's profit margin and its potentially higher borrowing costs.

Directors will likely debate whether Metro should keep the energy revenue for itself, how much that power might be worth in the future and whether Metro could scale down incineration if residents recycle and compost more than expected.

"The business model is one thing we have to determine out of the gate," said Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore, who chairs Metro waste management committee.

A hybrid option might be for Metro to finance the plant but contract out construction and operation, with an agreement on sharing both risks and revenues.

Metro's waste committee and board is expected to soon begin to frame its request for proposals, although it won't be finalized until early next year, after civic elections in November bring a new set of directors.

Moore said that call will leave the plant's location wide open, allowing open competition between out-of-region bidders like Covanta Energy, which proposes an incinerator at Gold River on Vancouver Island, and other proponents with in-region sites, such as a possible bid by Aquilini Renewable Energy on Tsawwassen First Nation land.

That may bring a tussle at the board over how to rate the bids.

Should more weight be given to avoiding local air emissions by barging trash to Gold River?

Or should efficiently located in-region sites with better potential to sell energy into a district heating network win out on dollar value because of lower transport costs and higher revenues?

Would locating the incinerator in Surrey help transform its emerging downtown with new development?

Or would it be less risky to place the plant in North Vancouver, where it could simply plug in to Lower Lonsdale's existing district heat system, now fired by natural gas?

Metro estimates an in-region burner will cost taxpayers at least \$1 billion less over the long term than out-of-region options – although critics hotly dispute the underlying assumptions.

Another tough choice is whether to give some preference to emerging waste conversion technologies, such as gasification or pyrolysis, which promise ultra-low emissions but don't have the track record of conventional mass-burn incineration.

"There was a lot of desire around the board to look at new and emerging waste-to-energy technology," Moore said.

Some directors warn those alternatives won't stand a chance if the bidding is wide open to a mass-burn

incinerator, which they expect to wield a big cost advantage.

Vancouver councillors, who tried a year ago to ban mass-burn combustion from the waste plan, are expected to mount a similar push again.

Moore said the board might opt to carve out part of the 500,000 tonnes of waste per year for proponents of alternative technologies, who wouldn't have to bid against a conventional incinerator.

That may lead to another choice – whether to go with a single plant or multiple ones.

Metro is also expected to hire a third-party independent expert for advice in the coming decisions.

A final decision on what will be built and where could be 18 months away, Metro officials say.

While the politicians decide the framework for what might be built, Metro will also start consulting the Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) to address concerns that toxic emissions will worsen air quality in the already polluted airshed.

Environment Minister Terry Lake ordered the consultations and establishment of a joint working group of the two regions, directing Metro to take steps to address "reasonable" concerns of the FVRD.

The two regions, at odds over the public health risks, have one year to agree on emission standards and environmental monitoring for any new incinerator. If they can't agree, the dispute goes to arbitration.

What counts as a "reasonable" objection?

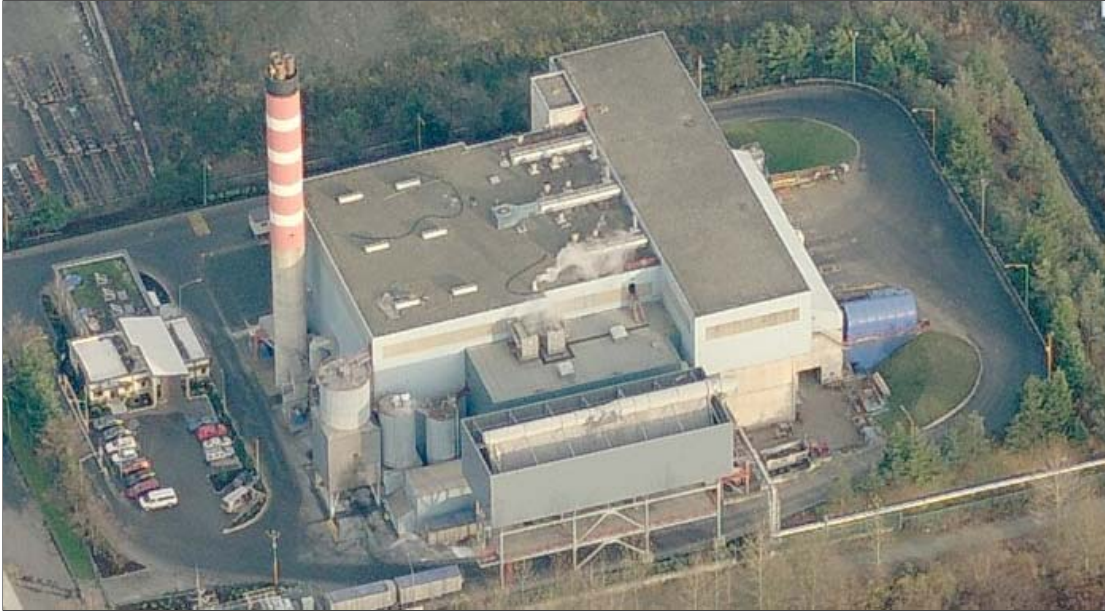
No one knows.

But the hammer of arbitration and subsequent provincial approvals necessary for any plant could still allow Victoria to block in-region incineration, in response to the demands of Valley residents.

Moore said he's hopeful staff of both regional districts can look objectively at the issues.

"Frankly, I'd like to try to take some of the politics out of it."

He said Metro is committed to using the best emissions control systems available.



Burnaby incinerator may wind down as recycling gains

One concern of recycling advocates – that building an incinerator will lock Metro into feeding it rather than continuing to improve recycling rates – is inaccurate, according to Metro waste committee chair Greg Moore.

If Metro gets beyond its new 2020 target of 80 per cent diversion and doesn't require as much disposal capacity, he said, the Burnaby waste-to-energy plant would be gradually decommissioned.

It has three burners and streams feeding them that each process about 90,000 tonnes of waste per year.

"We would slowly take those offline," Moore said.

He cautioned Metro's estimates of 1.3 million tonnes still requiring disposal in the future is based on the region hitting all its diversion targets, including the short-term commitment of recycling 70 per cent by 2015, up from 55 per cent now.

That will depend on aggressive new recycling efforts, tightened disposal bans and region-wide composting of food waste.

The new waste-to-energy plant would take the 500,000 tonnes per year Metro now sends to the Cache Creek landfill.

Another 500,000 tonnes goes to the Vancouver Landfill in Delta, while close to 280,000 tonnes goes to the Burnaby incinerator.

Metro previously committed to stop trucking its garbage to Cache Creek, although continued landfilling remains a backup option in the new plan.

Moore said there are plans to decrease use of the Vancouver Landfill over the long term, but noted some

landfill capacity is needed as a contingency and to take ash from incinerated garbage.

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