

by Paul van der Werf

"Things have not gotten worse. It's just that expectations have changed."



Odour

Zero tolerance for zero tolerance



Installation of process piping for the aerated tunnel floor at the City of Guelph's compost plant, built by Maple Reinders. Guelph's composting facility passed odour testing requirements related to its C of A conducted this summer under full capacity conditions using organic waste from Guelph, Waterloo Region and Hamilton. After odour complaints last November, the city stopped taking organic waste into the plant. Maple Reinders reviewed the facility's odour management and air containment systems, developed an action plan and made changes before the facility reopened in February. Some odour complaints have been received since then by the environment ministry, which investigated and concluded the odours were not traceable to the facility. As part of the initial stage of a three-year phase-in, a third of city households will get carts for curbside waste collection this fall. (INSET: Air exhaust stack at the plant.)

Let's face it: organic waste smells. The organic fraction of waste is dynamic — a microbial nation in constant motion. It breathes and emits halitosis-like plumes in the path of least resistance. We know that ever more in summer when the heat and (in some parts of the country) stifling humidity sets in like an irritated grandmother at a flea market. When it's collected and consolidated it becomes ever less pleasant and can create critical masses that could, like hurricanes, become a named storm hurtling with stinky intensity from its point of generation.

Odour is a peculiar thing. It can evoke qualitative and dramatic responses from those subjected to its buffeting when the wind is right but the day becomes wrong. The peculiar thing is that it can't easily and quickly be measured. Sure you can run around with a plastic teddler bag and submit this to an Odour Panel, but this is not exactly in real time. There are a few odour sniffer devices out there, and they offer little more.

Until the advent of the mass use of the automobile, the separation between odour and where we live was literally and figuratively much less pronounced than it is today. Many more of us lived in rural areas and were associated with rural life rather than commuting to some idyllic rural paradise where the hills are rolling but the cows and pigs are "odorless."

Those of us living in urban areas understood that if you lived beside

a brewery or rendering plant that from time to time (and maybe all the time!) you were going to be impacted. Wise planners of the day made sure sufficient buffer zones were in place to keep the industrial away from the homesteads.

Today this is less so. Housing developments sprout up in the shadow of landfills, rendering plants and compost facilities. Where buffers for the inevitable once existed, houses now sit. There is a parallel in the decline species due to loss of habitat. The habitats of facilities that handle organic materials are its first line of defence against odour, with buffer zones as the fail safe mechanism.

Sometimes there's not enough disclosure from real estate agents or proper due diligence from the prospective homeowner about where they are going to live. This is frustrating for organics processing facility operators, who may face nearby populations with unreasonable expectations that their facilities will never (ever!) impact on the community. The community tends to be naively shocked that such a thing could happen.

The shock stems in part from unreasonable expectations of technology providers that their systems will be lily white and smell like baby powder.

People have been taught that they have to tolerate very little. It's not clear who exactly to blame for this but it falls within the larger umbrella of general victimhood and entitlement practiced by our society. We expect to


live in some hermetically sealed bubble where we are never impacted by the world. We want all of the benefits but won't accept any impact.

People protest something as obviously good as wind turbines; this is pure quixotic folly! This mindset has everyone out on a constant collision course where unreasonable expectations never get met. Facility operators are always on the defensive; the public is always on the offensive.

Yes, there are some legitimate concerns, but many times people just have a dull axe to grind.

The City of Vancouver, as detailed by Tristan Hopper in an article in the *National Post* (August 16, 2012), is considering codifying odour into a by-law as a result of odours from a large rendering plant in operation since 1994. Tellingly (and astutely), Ray Robb — Metro Vancouver's manager of regulation and enforcement — was quoted as saying, "Things have not gotten worse. It's just a matter that expectations have changed."

Unreasonable odours are unreasonable. However, the expectation of *no odour* is also unreasonable. Somehow the rules and expectations need to be changed to allow people to enjoy their homes in peace, but understand that if they live around a facility that manages organic material and/or waste (including a rendering plant, composting facility, or fast food restaurant, etc.) that they're going to smell it sometimes.

While it's crucial that those who operate facilities that process organic materials have the appropriate abatement measures and procedures on place, it's also reasonable to assume that the buffer zones will sometimes not be enough. The "zero tolerance" approach practiced today sets facilities up for failure and the people around them for disappointment, like the child who unwraps a present only to find something different than what they expected. 

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