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A burning issue

OFFICIALLY, the decision not to build one of the biggest incinerators in Asia appears to have been made because of the prohibitive costs and not because of the public protests and court action over the adverse environmental and health impacts. Nevertheless, since the government seems also to have taken into account the fact that the people would not be happy if local authorities were to impose service charges to keep it in good condition — which they would have to because of the expense of maintaining it — according to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, it would appear that the financial burden was not the only consideration. As Najib has acknowledged, the government had also looked into the effects of the project on the environment and the people. It would appear then that the residents and environmentalists, who had raised a stink over the plan to locate the incinerator in Broga, went to parliament to register their protest and filed a suit to stop it from being built have cause for celebration.

But there is less joy for the authorities struggling to deal with the mountains of rubbish that we throw away each day. Given the magnitude and complexity of the problem, finding solutions is not simple. Historically, we bury rather than burn our rubbish. Or we dump them into rivers and streams. We have been able to avoid burning them because we were not short of land. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to bury them because there is a shortage of suitable sites. Moreover, our record on landfills is not good, with many damaging the environment. And recycling has yet to take off in a big way. This is probably why, provided they are affordable, said Najib, the government is not averse to incinerators. With the open waste dumps in Jeram and Kuala Langat running out of space in 10 years, Selangor Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Dr Mohamed Khir Toyo believes that incinerators may well be needed in the future.

It is true that incinerators have had a bad press and no community would like to have them in its backyard. Nowadays, as the actions of the residents of Broga have shown, people are concerned about the risks of incineration plants in their neighbourhoods. However, despite its downside, and given the fact that we seem to be running out of landfill sites and recycling has yet to become a mantra, it would appear that in the short term, incineration is an alternative that should not be ruled out.