

# Landfill liner sure to leak

By JUDY WALLACE

Our entire North Country region has reason to be proud of itself these days. Revitalization efforts have been undertaken by almost every town, and the results are beginning to show. The most recent example, Littleton's riverfront restoration project, has turned a sadly neglected part of town into a charming feature focused on the Ammonoosuc River.

But it would be shortsighted of us to expend all of our energy on beautifying and revitalizing our towns without taking into consideration the potential, even inevitable, lasting harm that will be caused when the liner at the Trudeau Road landfill in Bethlehem fails. When, not if. According to a report in the *Boston Sunday Globe Parade Magazine*, June 13, 1999, titled "What Will We Do With All Our Garbage?" Stephen Lester, Science Director of the Center for Health, Environment and Justice in Falls Church, Va. is quoted: "We have learned that it is only a matter of time until even the best engineered landfill with state of the art 1999 design will leak. Even the very best landfill liners made with tough hi-density polyethylene are vulnerable to chemicals found in most household garbage."

And this isn't even news. Here is what the EPA had to say about landfills in 1988: "Even the best liner and leachate collection systems will eventually fail due to natural deterioration..." (quoted from "Solid Waste Disposal Criteria," USEPA, Federal Register, Aug. 30, 1988).

Landfills leak for all kinds of reasons—common household wastes corrode this integrity of the liner, rodents burrow, leachate systems clog, berms break. And we're not even talking about some far-off future time (as if that didn't matter to our grandchildren). Many failures have already occurred. A double-lined landfill similar to the Trudeau Road facility was completed in December 1988 in Westminster, Md. By April 1989 it had failed and was leaking. One Carroll County Commissioner is quoted: "I'm surprised that this is a modern, sophisticated, two-liner landfill...You realize how easy it is for something to go wrong."

And in Santa Clara, Calif., where a bitterly opposed landfill was leaking toxic chemicals, the same story—"It was predicted, and it happened," said Bruce Ikhinin, local attorney and landfill opponent. The "state of the art" landfill was not supposed to leak and officials could not explain how the toxic chemicals had gotten 100 feet past the earthen dam intended to stop leachate. Pat Ferraro, a member of the Santa Clara County Water District Board of Directors said, "It was the craziest thing in the world to build near our largest reservoir and between

two groundwater basins. There is no such thing as a landfill that doesn't leak." We can be sure that both of these landfills had all of the necessary permits. Nevertheless, they failed. When the Bethlehem landfill liner fails, whatever is in the leachate will then be in the Ammonoosuc River.

To make matters worse, documents filed in Grafton County Superior Court by Bethlehem landfill operator North Country Environmental Systems, indicate that the company plans to increase the annual tonnage at the landfill to 140,000 tons per year, an increase of nearly 45 percent over the 97,300 tons accepted in 1997. It's frightening to think how quickly the new cell will be filled at this rate. And how tall will the landfill eventually be? The larger the footprint becomes, the higher the trash can be piled.

Casella's landfill in Hampden, Maine is currently over 200 feet tall, with an application to increase it to 290 feet. This is more than twice the current height of the Bethlehem facility!

If being the nation's largest per capita out-of-state importer weren't enough of a dubious distinction for New Hampshire, according to an article in *NH Business Review* June 7-14, 1999, matters are about to get worse, New Hampshire will soon reach the point where more waste will be imported than we as a state generate ourselves. This is not news to the residents of Bethlehem who have already had more than 800 years-worth of their own garbage deposited in their town. It is already here and we have to live with it forever. What we must concern ourselves with now is not simply the existence of this hazard, but the expansion of this hazardous time bomb.

We all know that our waste has to go somewhere. The problem with this specific site is that, according to US Geological Survey Maps, it sits on a stratified drift aquifer feeding into the Ammonoosuc River...that's just asking for trouble. Littleton and Lisbon as well as all the other towns downriver of the Ammonoosuc should be concerned to know that there is a giant baggie containing three billion pounds of who knows what sitting on an aquifer just 10 miles upstream. We are used to thinking of the Ammonoosuc and Gale Rivers as places for children and adults to fish and swim in. It's a part of the landscape and our everyday lives that we take for granted.

But of these towns, it is only Bethlehem that is waiting to learn if its appeal will be heard by the Supreme Court, because that is where the landfill sits. Bethlehem may be alone in the area but it is not alone as a "host" community. For Casella, it is beginning to appear that litigation

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with their host communities is pretty much business as usual. Casella filed suit against the town of Hampden, Maine in March, alleging that their zoning ordinance is illegal, and filed a similar suit against the town of Angelica, N.H. in May 1988.

A local environmental concerns group, Environmental Action for Northern New Hampshire (EA) based in Bethlehem, is also waiting for a court decision regarding its appeal for intervenor status. They are hoping to be heard separately because they have other issues and evidence that may only be able to be introduced by them. According to their attorney, Ed Boutin, the persistence and commitment of EA lends weight and support to the town's own chances of having its appeal heard because it is a citizens' group of many members and supporters.

Environmental Action's efforts have been funded thus far by these members and supporters committed to upholding Bethlehem's zoning ordinance regarding landfill expansion. In the future, EA plans to institute a regular water-testing program. All people interested in the future quality of the Ammonoosuc River are encouraged to join and participate in the activities of EA. What eventually happens in the courts will affect the residents of Bethlehem. What eventually happens in the Ammonoosuc River will affect us all.

*Judy Wallace is a Bethlehem business owner and a member of Environmental Action for Northern New Hampshire (EA).*