

# As landfill space dwindles in Massachusetts, New Hampshire has become the state's dumping ground

By [David Abel](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 19, 2021, 5:10 p.m.



Pictured on the shore of Forest Lake are (left to right) Wayne Morrison, Eliot Wessler, and Tom Tower, with the proposed site of a landfill visible across the lake. It is proposed for the valley area seen behind Morrison. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

DALTON, N.H. — In the rolling hills along the northwestern edge of the White Mountains, beside a nearly century-old state park and a serene lake where neighbors fish and swim, a waste management company plans to build New England's first new landfill in decades.

The proposed Granite State Landfill, which has sparked protests across the North Country of New Hampshire, would bring more than 100 heavy trucks rumbling every day through small towns to dump nearly a half-million tons of trash a year on 137 acres of forested wetlands.

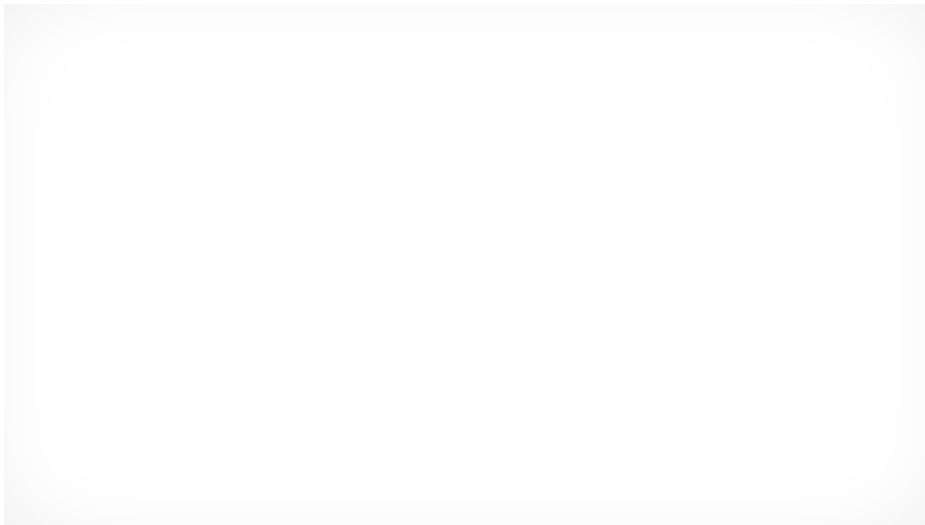


The valley at center left of the photo is the site of the proposed landfill near Forest Lake. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

Much of that refuse would likely come from out of state, a growing burden that has peeved many in New Hampshire, where nearly half of all trash dumped here is hauled in from surrounding states — mostly from Massachusetts.

“We don’t want to be the dumping ground for the rest of New England,” said Wayne Morrison, whose homes abuts Forest Lake, a recreational draw stocked with smallmouth bass and pike less than 3,000 feet from the proposed dump. “It’s totally obscene to put a landfill here; this is the worst possible place.”

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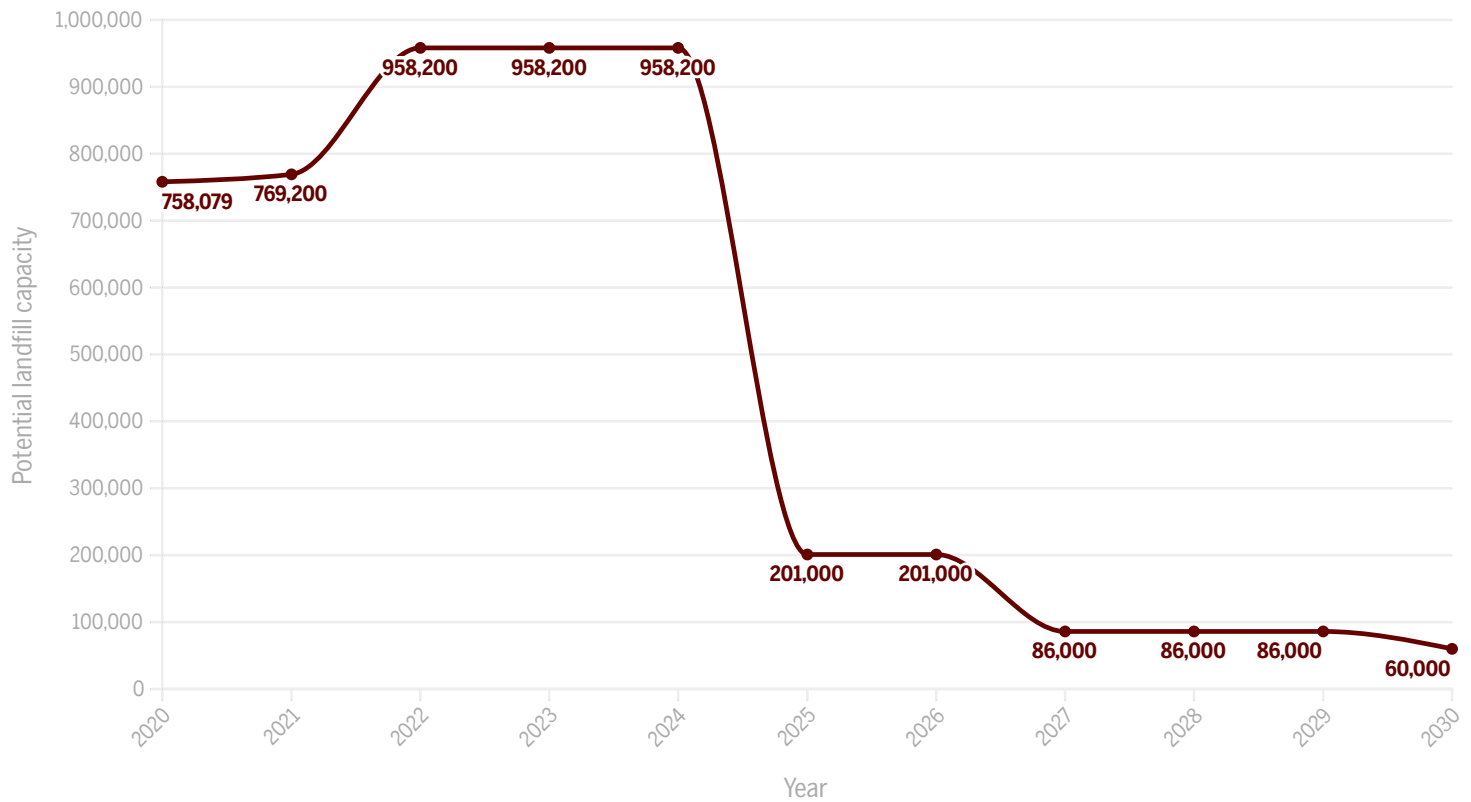
Protesters outside of White Mountains Regional High School, including 12-year-old Berkley Parenteau (far left) gathered before a hearing held inside on a landfill proposal. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

As landfills close after reaching capacity and zoning rules make it difficult to expand existing dumps or open new ones, officials at the company behind the Dalton landfill, Casella Waste Systems, contend the region needs more places to unload trash.

They cite a 2019 [state report](#) that estimated New Hampshire could have a shortfall of 120,000 tons in annual disposal capacity by 2025, and 10 times that by 2034, assuming the closure of several existing landfills and no significant reduction in the waste stream.

“New Hampshire is looking at serious capacity constraints over the next two decades,” said Joseph Fusco, vice president of Casella, a Vermont-based waste management company that has nearly \$800 million in annual revenue and operates nine landfills and 20 recycling facilities in the Northeast. “There are constraints elsewhere in the region, and those constraints will become New Hampshire’s problem as well. We’re addressing a public policy problem.”

## Projected Landfill Capacity in Massachusetts



Source: Department of environmental protection

 A Flourish chart

Casella has an agreement with the owner of a sand and gravel company to buy the Dalton land, which is close to two interstate highways. Fusco said the geology of the land also makes it ideal for a landfill.

“This is a prime location,” Fusco said. “This is the site that makes the most sense.”

It’s also easier to put landfills in New Hampshire than other states. Fusco and others at Casella say state law limits the ability of local officials to reject a landfill and requires they defer to state regulators.

But officials in New Hampshire and Massachusetts say it’s unclear whether new landfills are necessary.

Between 2015 and 2019, New Hampshire received an average of 2.2 million tons of trash a year, 47 percent of it from elsewhere in New England, according to the state Department of Environmental Services. In 2019, 86 percent of imported garbage came from Massachusetts.

Because of interstate commerce laws, New Hampshire can’t ban out-of-state trash. But it can impose regulations that could significantly limit imports, as some states do. Vermont, for example, requires municipalities that send trash to a landfill there to submit a solid waste master plan, which few from outside the state do.

With most of New Hampshire's six landfills seeking permission to expand, officials said they're unsure if the state needs another dump, especially given that its population of about 1.4 million is not growing by much.

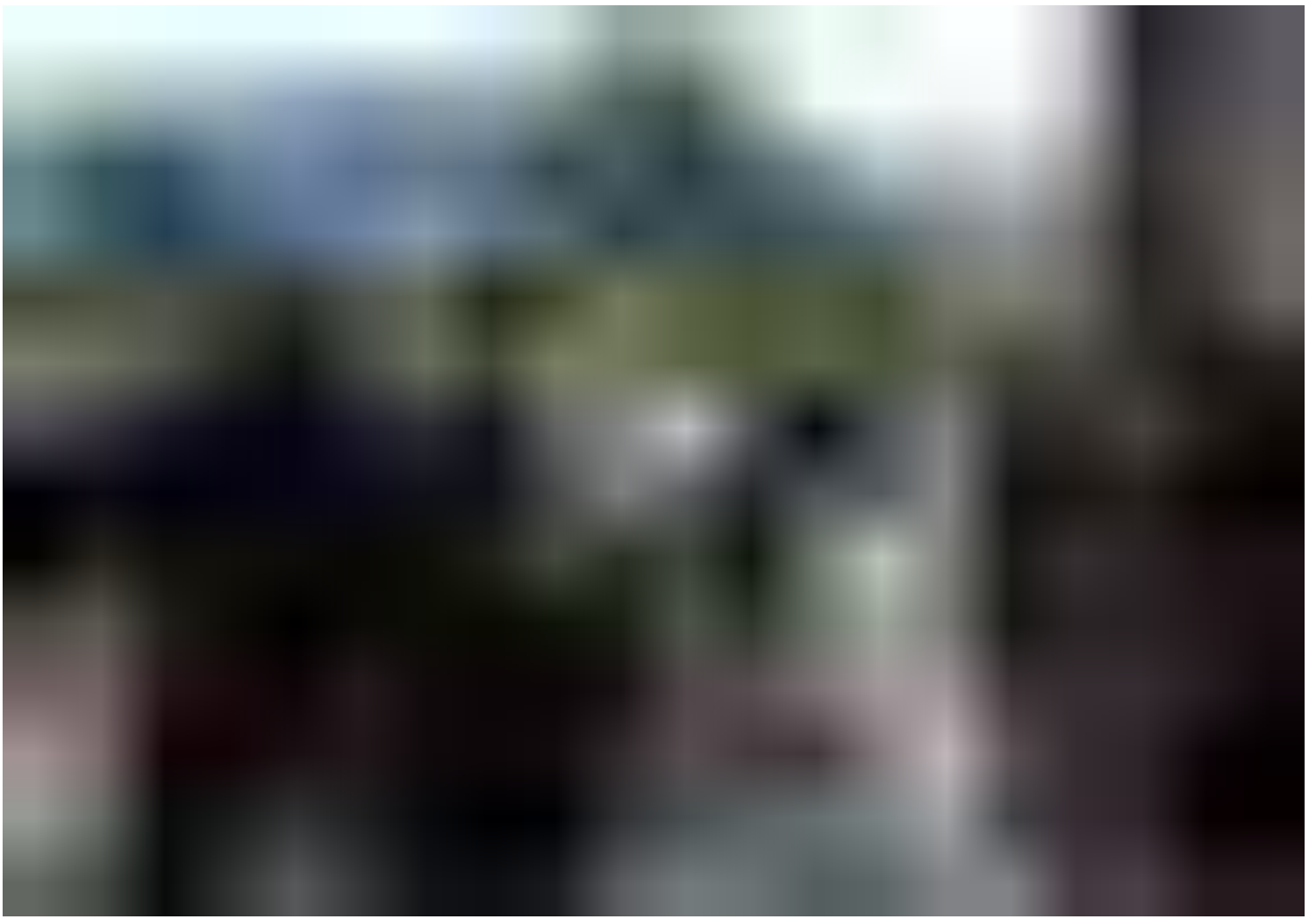
"We have adequate capacity for the next several years, but it's hard to answer whether there's enough space over the next 20 years," said Mike Wimsatt, director of the waste management division of the Department of Environmental Services. "If there's a deficit, we'd conclude there's a need for capacity."

The amount of imported trash is not included in that calculation, and changes to how the state regulates such imports would have to be approved by the Republican-controlled Legislature, Wimsatt said.

Under pressure from deep-pocketed waste companies such as Casella, which hopes the new facility will make up for lost revenue after its sprawling dump in nearby Bethlehem closes this decade, the Legislature has been loath to make such changes. In May, lawmakers [rejected](#) a bill that would have banned landfills within two miles of state parks, a measure aimed squarely at Casella's proposal.

Casella opposed the legislation, because it was unnecessary, Fusco said.

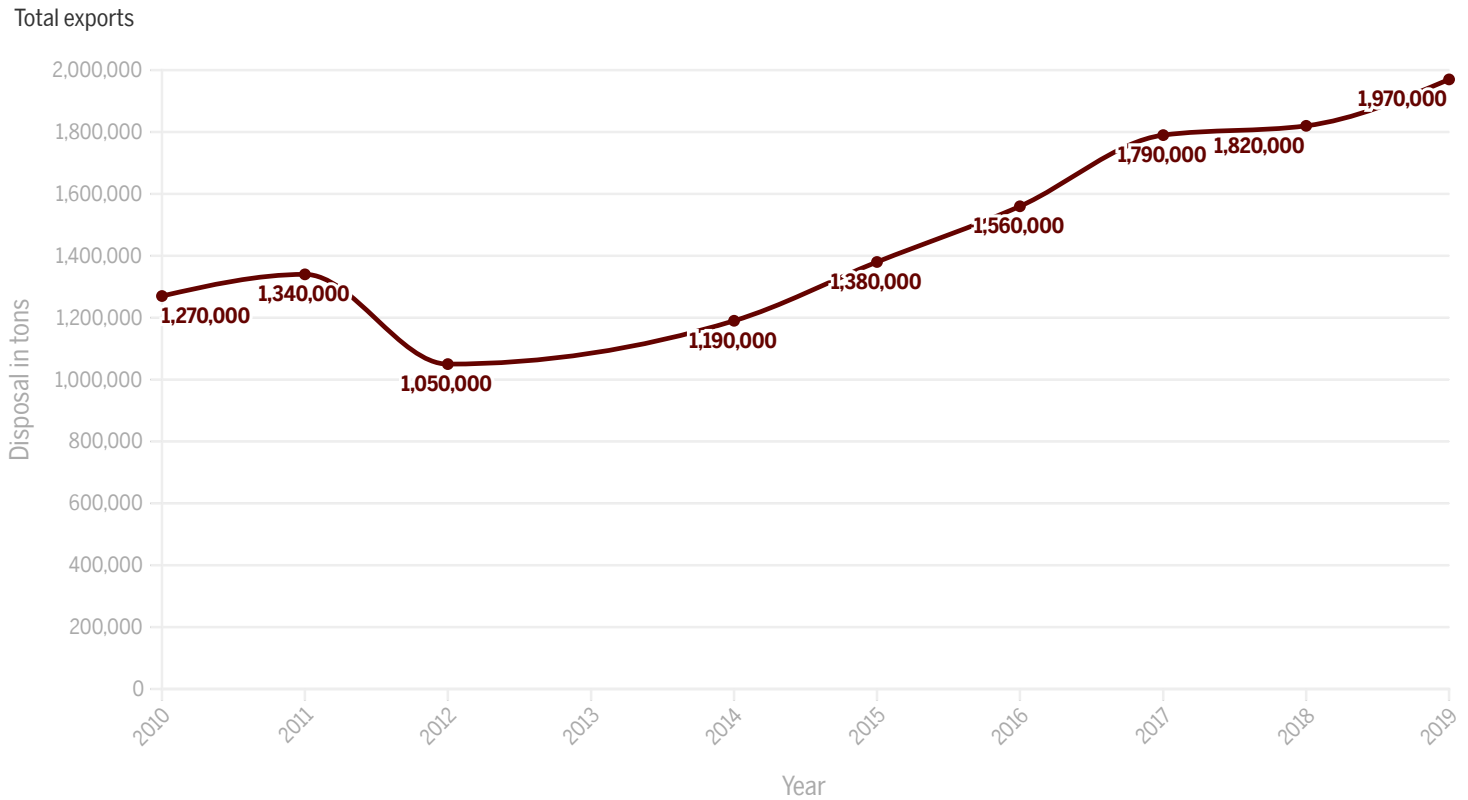
Earlier this year, the Legislature required state officials to complete a new solid waste master plan by next year, for the first time since 2003.



Protesters outside of White Mountains Regional High School. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

In Massachusetts, where landfill space is quickly growing scarce, waste companies have increasingly looked north.

## Massachusetts disposal exports from 2010 to 2019



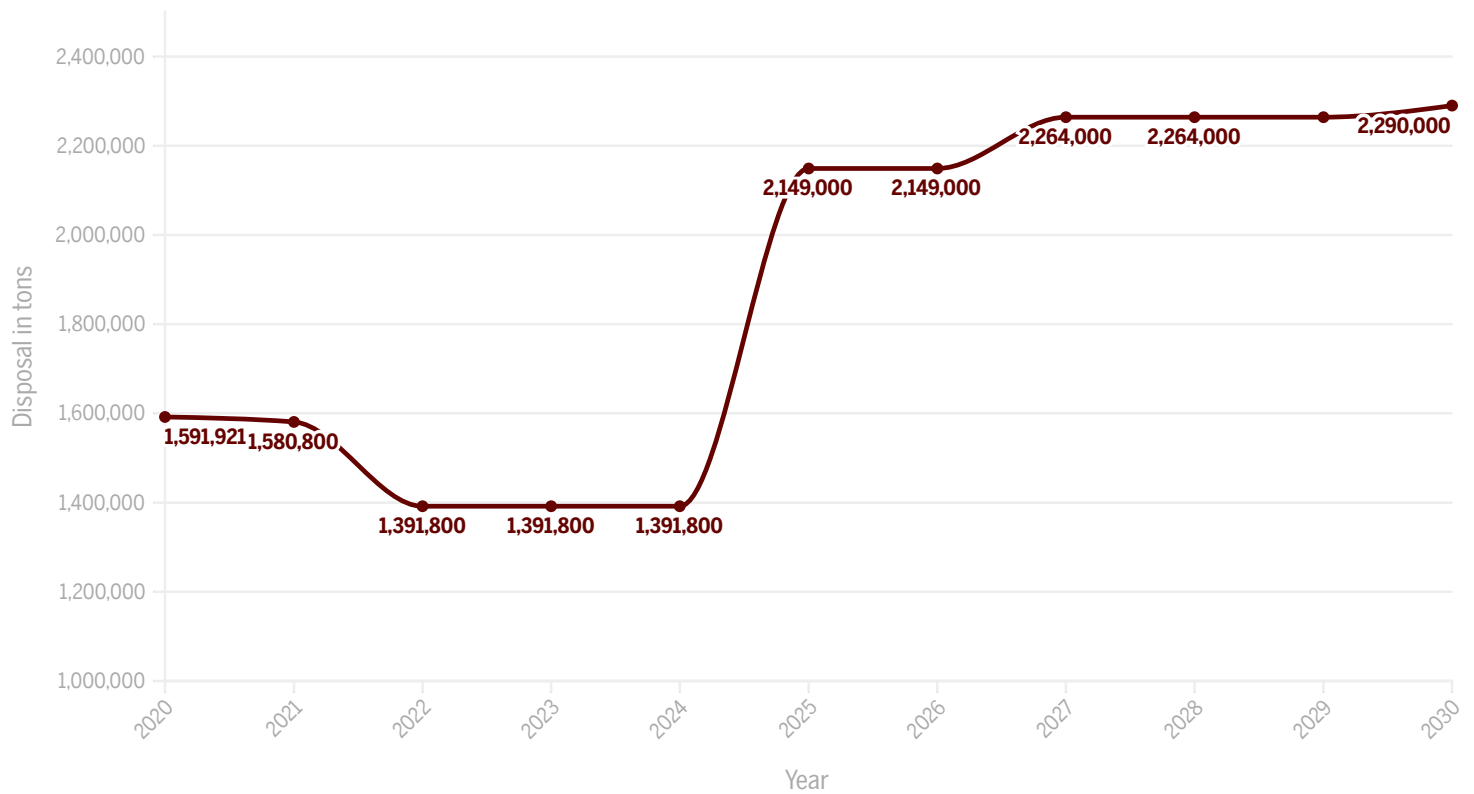
Source: Department of environmental protection

 A Flourish chart


Of more than 5.5 million tons of refuse that Massachusetts produced in 2019, the most recent year for which data was available, the state exported nearly 2 million tons; that's 55 percent more than in 2010.

Without significant changes, those exports are projected to rise sharply. All but one of the state's seven landfills are projected to close by 2030, and total capacity in Massachusetts is expected to decline to just 60,000 tons, 90 percent below current levels.

## Projected Net Exports of Trash in Massachusetts: 2020-2030



Source: Department of environmental protection

 A Flourish chart

Environmental advocates have long argued that state officials, aggressively lobbied by waste management companies that can charge as much as \$100 a ton for disposal in New England, have done too little to limit the waste stream.

“The waste companies want us to think they’re the only way to go,” said Kirstie Pecci, director of the Zero Waste Project at the Boston-based Conservation Law Foundation. “That’s not even close to being true.”





Fred Anderson (back to camera), the president of the Forest Lake Association, joined protesters outside of White Mountains Regional High School. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

She and other environmental advocates oppose the proposed landfill in Dalton, which they say would encourage greater imports of garbage and impede broader efforts to reduce trash.

Most of the waste in Massachusetts, Pecci said, is needlessly buried or burned: Some 2.2 million tons of material such as cardboard and paper could be recycled, another 1.5 million tons of food and yard waste could be composted, while tons more of toxic materials, such as batteries, are sent to landfills illegally.

She and others have encouraged state lawmakers throughout New England to pass bills that would promote recycling, such as [expanding the state's bottle-deposit law](#), and require companies to cover the costs of their products' disposal, such as a recently [passed bill in Maine](#).

“There’s an overall injustice of cities and towns paying for this pollution,” she said. “It’s not an accident we’re not seeing proposals for new landfills in affluent towns in Massachusetts.”

In Dalton, where Casella has promised to pay the town \$71 million over 25 years if officials support the landfill, the proposal has [divided](#) its 900 residents.

Last month, Town Meeting members approved by just five votes an extension of a temporary emergency

zoning rule that gives Dalton officials the option of trying to stop the project. Officials in neighboring towns have also urged the state to reject the proposal, raising concerns about everything from traffic to the environment.

Casella officials have suggested they could proceed without local approval, citing a New Hampshire Supreme Court decision they said allows state officials the final say on where a landfill can be built.

Along Forest Lake, where nearly every resident's yard has a "No Landfill" sign, Eliot Wessler said he understood why so much money from Casella might be tempting, especially when it could eliminate property taxes for years to come.

But he and other opponents pointed to potential environmental dangers, noting a recent [leak of about 150,000 gallons of leachate](#) — landfill runoff that's often contaminated with heavy metals and other toxic chemicals — at Casella's dump in Bethlehem.

"This is an extremely environmentally sensitive area, with a lot of potential contamination of water supplies," he said. "This is a godawful location to put a landfill."

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