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Bethlehem Residents Say Landfill Truck Traffic On Main Street A Bad Idea

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Before selectmen met on Monday to accept public input on possible landfill truck traffic through town, some two dozen local residents turned out to Bethlehem Town Hall to protest Casella Waste Systems' proposed truck route along Bethlehem's Main Street to the company's proposed landfill in Dalton. (Photo by Robert Blechl)

BETHLEHEM — Noise, smells, risks to pedestrians, traffic safety and economic development, and no guarantee truck traffic wouldn't increase years down the road — those were some of the reasons cited by residents in opposition to Casella Waste Systems' proposed landfill trucking route through downtown.

On Monday, Bethlehem selectmen accepted public input from residents and taxpayers on the company's proposed route along Bethlehem's Main Street to Route 3 in Twin Mountain and Route 116 in Bethlehem to a proposed new landfill in Dalton that would replace Casella's landfill along Trudeau Road in Bethlehem that is expected to close at the end of 2026.

Of the 15 people who spoke during the 45-minute proceeding that was offered in-person and remotely on Zoom, virtually all were opposed to a Bethlehem route.

Their input will be forwarded to the state agencies, including the New Hampshire departments of Transportation and Environmental Services, that will make the decision on whether or not to grant the company the needed permits.

Selectman Chris Jensen said he spoke with an official at DES who said while DES cannot control truck traffic, the department can consider the concerns of residents as DES weighs how much of a public benefit there would be to a new landfill.

The question then becomes exactly how much landfill truck traffic there would be, he said.

According to an Aug. 27 letter from Casella, "a small portion of the overall landfill traffic" would be going up Interstate 91 and down I-93 and getting off at Exit 40 for Bethlehem, said Jensen.

The letter estimated one truck per hour in each direction, which means two trucks per hour, and with landfill operations requested in Casella's application from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays and some activity on Saturdays, he said.

The estimates are for the large tractor-trailer trash haulers, excluding the smaller vehicles going to and from the landfill.

With one truck going to a landfill in Dalton and another returning the other way, it suggests the possibility of as many as 24 trucks a day through Bethlehem, said Jensen.

On Monday afternoon, Jensen said he spoke with Casella engineer John Gay, who told him that Casella will not accept incoming trucks after 3 p.m., which would put the number at 18 truck trips in nine hours.

“I didn’t see anything in the application that would guarantee the number of trucks would not increase,” said Jensen. “Of course, the impact along 116 would be much greater for those residents because that’s where all the trucks will be going. In one filing, Casella estimated a total of 102 loads a day to the proposed landfill. So we can double that because the trucks won’t be staying there.”

Randy Smith, a Route 116 resident, said he is concerned because that stretch of Route 116 is near the proposed landfill entrance is already dangerous and heavy with existing truck traffic, like logging trucks.

“If you had 200 over an eight-hour period, that’s 25 trucks an hour up and down 116,” he said. “The speed that the traffic is on that road is out of control. It’s 55 or 50 mph speed limit and no one does that. There’s accidents, and adding the increased traffic is only going to make it more dangerous. Bethlehem would be directly impacted by that because they’ll be responding with emergency services.”

Resident Chuck Phillips cited adverse impacts to the local economy and businesses.

“This represents a complete reversal of the dollars and efforts that have gone into promoting and enhancing Bethlehem as a destination,” he said. “We have at least eight pedestrian priority crosswalks, which people use and expect traffic to stop. We have parking and businesses located on both sides of the road ... Adding this number of trucks, and having observed those trucks on both Route 3 and Trudeau Road and the ones that sometimes come through town, they do not adhere to the 30 mph speed limit ... It represents noise, smell. It’s just a bad idea.”

Resident Katherine Darges said economic development will suffer because no one is going to want to put money into a town that has heavy truck traffic.

“We need to get some honest answers,” she said. “Maybe I’m terribly wrong, but I don’t think we can trust Casella to have such a low limit each day on the number of trucks that will be coming through. They seem to underestimate a lot of things.”

Long Hill is also slippery during winters, with a number of vehicles sliding off the roadway, and it would be a major problem if a landfill leachate truck comes loose and goes flying off the road, she said.

Ian Dowling, a Bethlehem resident and owner of Rek-Lis Brewery, said Bethlehem is in the process of an “amazing transformation” as a destination area.

Regular truck traffic that brings noise is already a problem downtown and adding another 30 or 40 dump trucks that smell and can have trash fly off them will only make it worse, including for the diners eating or having a beer outside during the warm months, he said.

The Bethlehem Trails Association is also in the midst of expanding its mountain bike trails and plans three or four crossings on Main Street, said Dowling.

“Mountain biking, economic development — I think it’s a horrible idea to let these people run their trucks through town,” said Dowling.

Resident Cheryl Jensen said roadside cleanup along Route 3 where the trucks currently run to the Trudeau Road landfill is a regular problem because of trash flying off trucks.

“Are we going to have that on Main Street in Bethlehem?” she said. “This is a potential trash issue.”

Resident Martin Glavac, a former selectman who supports landfill expansion along Trudeau Road (voted down twice by voters in 2017 and 2018), said he agrees with the concerns about truck traffic through downtown and said a way to avoid it on Main Street and on Route 116 is to support the expansion of the existing landfill in Bethlehem.

Because of differing truck count estimates, Glavac encouraged selectmen, before they send public comments to state officials, to confirm the exact number of trucks that would be going along Main Street.

Resident Julie Seely said she agrees with Glavac that an accurate number is important, and said she’d like to go further and not just look at the present, but into the future.

Casella’s last permit for expansion estimated 280,000 tons a year, but the average was about 320,000 tons, with one year as high as 433,000, she said.

“I urge the board to not just look at the traffic that’s estimated for the present, but to extrapolate what we might see in the future as well if that rate of growth continues,” said Seely. “460,000 tons a year [Casella’s current estimate for a landfill in Dalton] could well be 15 to 20 percent higher each year ...”

Resident Brian Cook suggested that Casella bypass Main Street by traveling farther south on I-93 to Route 3.

Resident Dick Robie said not many people love Main Street more than he does and he doesn't think there would be a steady stream of trucks moving along it if it ends up being the route.

Submitting a letter in opposition was Sue Greenlaw, principal of Bethlehem Elementary School, who said she is extremely concerned about an increase in traffic.

"Trucks and other traffic already pass by the elementary school at very unsafe speeds," she wrote. "Crossing 302 even with a crossing guard often feels unsafe due to the speed and distractibility of drivers. I think a large number of trucks to the already busy route could create a dangerous situation for our students. Please take the route through the town of Bethlehem off the table not only for students but also for the safety of our beautiful and thriving community ... It would be short-sighted of us to make any decisions that would negatively impact this positive growth ... Please do not make a decision that would negatively impact us for years to come."

Resident Kristina Zontini, who plans to open a business on Main Street and has concerns about the possible truck impacts, asked if there is any enforcement if the truck counts go above the estimates.

"If it does go through and there's a lot of negative impact, can it be reversed, or once it's open is it just open for good for truck traffic?" she asked.

"I do not know if there's any enforcement or if they could enforce it," said Jensen.

"I think it's opening up a can of worms," said Zontini.

No one from Casella spoke during the public input session.

Jensen said the board has received 15 letters offering public input and selectmen will continue to accept letters.

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