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Madison County postpones landfill vote after residents urge caution



Resident Marsha Rafte addresses her concerns with the Madison County Landfill vote during the recent Madison County Board of Supervisors meeting. (Roger Seibert – MediaNews Group)





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WAMPSVILLE, N.Y. — Madison County’s Board of Supervisors tabled a vote Tuesday evening on whether to enter a public/private partnership to address financial issues facing the county landfill.

Madison County planned to join an operations, maintenance and lease agreement with New England Waste Services of New York, a wholly owned subsidiary of Casella Waste Systems. The county would join five other landfills in New York state that are run with a public-private partnership.

The decision came after county residents urged the board to consider all options. Several residents spoke during an hour-long public comment period on the issue in the supervisor’s chambers. They addressed concerns including environmental impact, government transparency, and the partnership’s impact on the county’s future.

“Madison County will continue to look at what is best for the future of our landfill, our residents and our employees,” county officials said in a statement. “The Board of Supervisors has decided to adjourn for the year of 2023 and continue evaluating the decision before them. The next board meeting is scheduled for January 2, 2024. The topic of the landfill will not be on the agenda.”

In late 2021 the board passed a resolution to hire an engineering firm, Cornerstone Engineering and Geology, to offer a third-party opinion of the current operations and potential alternatives. Cornerstone released a final report of their findings and recommendations in February 2023.

The Cornerstone report showed that the current waste disposal fees are not sufficiently covering the costs of operations, capital expenses, and long-term management of the landfill. Cornerstone states in the report that unless the county makes changes to the current system, waste disposal fees will have to increase to fully fund the program's annual costs, as well as the future costs of landfill closure and post-closure monitoring.

Marsha Rafta said she has three concerns with the partnership. "I came down to three concerns...the first one is time," she said. "You have it, I want you to take it, please. You have until the middle of February to make a decision. I heard last night that Casella won't walk away if you don't vote tonight. So you have time to feel confident about your vote...whatever it is."

"The second one is the expected revenue if you sign the contract," she continued. "If you put it in the general fund what happens to undedicated money? It gets eaten away. And twenty-five years comes up fast. So please put it in reserve funds. Make a financial plan. Last week I spoke with county administrator Mark Scimone and he said you could put some in county funds. Some...that's a little vague."

"The third thing is unintended consequences. I've had a lot of life experiences and it's given me a healthy respect for Murphy's Law. One, two, three...think about where you will put the revenue and unintended consequences."

Murphy's Law is an old adage that states if something can go wrong it will go wrong. The private/public partnership landfill is projected to end after 25 years.

"I represent a group of people, concerned citizens," Doug Holdridge said. "I implore you on behalf of those people to not rush into this. There are other possibilities."

"I have a packet that I placed on each of your desks," he continued. "I implore you to look at that as soon as possible and explore those possibilities to keep the ownership of the landfill in Madison County residents. This premium space is valuable and it will only get more valuable as surrounding landfills fill up. We have a very valuable commodity that shouldn't be given away freely."

Former county solid waste and sanitation director James Zecca shared concerns voiced by former county supervisors and solid waste committee members regarding the private/public partnership.

“The recent Cornerstone study clearly outlines the irreplaceable value inherent in Madison County’s landfill,” he said. “Alternative avenues exist for the county to obtain necessary tonnage and funds through direct arrangements with other municipalities or brokers. This approach could effectively stabilize operations for the long term.

“Moreover, reversion to standard operations in the future would necessitate the drastic reduction of the landfill service life over a hundred years to a mere twenty-five years or less as proposed in the form of the twenty-five-year contract with Casella Waste Systems,” he continued. “While acknowledging the use of some space for our county landfill, the proposed contract allowing for seventy-five years of space appears to be disproportionate to the county’s needs and the value of the resource in the Cornerstone report and the Kinsella group’s proposal.”

The county considered several alternatives to improve the long-term financial viability of the Solid Waste Department:

- a public-private partnership for the operation and maintenance of the landfill, which they said is an advantageous, cost-effective alternative. The county put out a request for proposals this past year, reviewed the submissions, and have selected a preferred partner with NEWSNY to operate the facilities.

County officials believe the public-private partnership would achieve long-term financial stability and sustainability. The county will continue to own the land and lease it to NEWSNY, who will run day-to-day operations. It will also be involved in any future changes to the landfill operations and will retain the NYSDEC permit.

- continue current operations, with the implementation of some efficiency measures, such as closing some of the transfer stations and beginning to charge a fee for recyclables.

If Madison County were to stay status quo, tipping fees would go from \$88 to \$113 per ton in 2024 to fully fund the current programs, and as high as \$150 per ton in five years to comply with upcoming regulations.

Punch Cards would go from \$20 to \$30 to fully cover costs of operations.

- close the landfill and build a transfer station to send waste elsewhere. This alternative was rejected because it does not achieve long-term financial stability and sustainability.

- an inter-municipal agreement with the Onondaga County Resource Recovery Agency.

This alternative provided fewer benefits and required significant quantities of out-of-county waste from beyond Onondaga County to achieve sufficient economies for the county to operate cost-effectively.

– increase waste volume. Madison County continues to operate the landfill, by accepting sufficient volumes of out-of-county waste to achieve profitability and long-term sustainability.

This alternative was rejected because of the financial risk and the challenges of finding highly trained staff to meet the ever-increasing technical and environmental requirements of running a landfill over the next 25 years.



Charles Pritchard – Oneida Daily Dispatch
Tractor trailers haul debris to the Madison County Landfill a few years ago. (FILE PHOTO)



Former county solid waste and sanitation director James Zecca discusses his concerns with the Madison County Landfill vote during the recent Madison County Board of Supervisors meeting. (Roger Seibert – MediaNews Group)



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