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FEATURED

North Country Residents Urge State To Deny Landfill Wetlands Permit

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More than 100 North Country residents turned out to White Mountains Regional High School on Wednesday for a rally to protest the proposed landfill in Dalton and urge the state Department of Environmental Services, which held a public hearing in the school, to deny a wetlands permit sought by Casella Waste Systems. (Photo by Robert Blechl)

WHITEFIELD — Residents from across the North Country turned out on Wednesday to urge the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services to deny a wetlands permit sought by Casella Waste Systems for a 137-acre landfill in Dalton.

Prior to the DES hearing at White Mountains Regional High School to gather public input on the permit, some 125 residents with protest signs held a rally in front of the school to oppose the landfill and permit.

Inside the school auditorium, an upward of 300 residents gathered.



The vast majority opposed a granting of the permit, with some speaking citing the fines and violations Casella has incurred through the years in operating its landfill in Bethlehem and landfills in other states.

A large number, too, voiced distrust of the company's environmental record and its ability to safely operate a landfill, and some were dubious that Casella would stop at 137 acres when it seeks to buy 1,900 acres of land beside Forest Lake State Park.

Others noted that the 17 acres of wetlands and loss of five vernal pools would be the largest destruction of wetlands in New Hampshire in a decade.

A few residents also took aim at DES and questioned the department's willingness to abide by its mission statement to protect the environment and the state's wetlands.

Of the 59 people who spoke during the hearing that lasted nearly six hours, just five expressed support for Casella and the permit.

In presenting the company's plan, Casella engineer John Gay, who said the proposed landfill site is near Pinetree Power and other businesses, faced a tough crowd and drew laughs when he said, "One of the things we liked about the site is it's in an industrial area."

The landfill would be safe and is near a ridge and would have a double liner system, he said.

"This landfill will not have an impact on the water quality," said Gay. "Can't happen."

That comment also drew laughs and triggered one person to shout, "Didn't it just happen in Bethlehem?," referring to the 154,000-gallon leachate spill at Casella's Bethlehem landfill that occurred in early May, flowing over the ground and into a detention pond and going undetected by the company for two days.

DES, whose officials said it could be the largest landfill leachate spill in New Hampshire, is investigating the incident.

Casella plans a new three-phase landfill in Dalton (63 acres for the first phase and 35 and 39 acres for the second and third) after Bethlehem voters twice rejected the company's proposal to expand that town's 61-acre landfill district by another 100 acres.

The Bethlehem landfill is expected to reach capacity and close in about 2026.

In seeking a new landfill site in the North Country, Gay said four locations were looked at, two in Twin Mountain, one in Shelburne, and the one in Dalton, the latter of which he said is favorable to the company.

Most residents who provided testimony to DES, however, said it wouldn't be favorable for the North Country.

Opponents Swamp Supporters

Erik Johnson, of Dalton, said when he heard about the Dalton landfill proposal he thought common sense would prevail.

Instead, Casella has engaged in "false promises" and a "pseudo-scientific marketing campaign" and is putting "profits over ethics" and "share prices over public health," said Johnson, a member of the North Country Alliance for Balanced Change.

The company's violations and track record in Bethlehem, New York, Vermont, Massachusetts and other states should be "red flags" and DES should encourage Casella to find a better site by denying the permit, he said.

Wednesday's hearing also drew local lawmakers, among them state Sen. Erin Hennessey, R-Littleton, and state Reps. Dennis Thompson, R-Stewartstown; Linda Massimilla, D-Littleton; Troy Merner, R-Lancaster, and Edith Tucker, D-Randolph.

Citing wetlands scientist and Antioch University professor Rick Van de Poll, Tucker said Van de Poll characterizes the proposed project as "perhaps one of the worst potential environmental disasters in the Granite State in recent memory."

Van de Poll said no comprehensive wetlands evaluation or wildlife habitat impact studies have been completed and the project would permanently impact "seven times more wetlands than the failed Northern Pass proposal."

Chris Quigley, of Lancaster, cited adverse impacts to tourism if the landfill is approved and said Casella's claim that New Hampshire has a landfill capacity shortage problem is not accurate.

"The only solid waste crisis in New Hampshire is Casella's, not ours," said Tom Tower, of Whitefield, another member of NCABC.

Wayne Morrison, of Whitefield, who said a landfill would negatively impact the region's health and quality of life, noted a Casella mailer to abutters states that up to 49 percent of waste could come from other states.

"It's good profit for Casella, it's not good for the citizens of New Hampshire," he said.

He called the proposed site an "inappropriate, in fact, terrible, site for a dump," and to DES said, "Our local residents and tourists need your protection."

Other residents said the Mt. Carberry landfill near Berlin has ample capacity for North Country waste for many years to come if a Casella landfill is denied for Dalton.

Thompson said the only thing northern New Hampshire has to sell is tourism, and another landfill would hurt it.

“It’s not our fault Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island are at landfill capacity,” he said. “It’s our fault if we allow that [waste] to come up here.”

Bonnie Boswell, of Whitefield, a fifth-generation Boswell with a home by Forest Lake, said, “If Casella is allowed to build this dump, it will be a scarred land with a mountain of trash.”

The odor of a “mega-dump” can travel for miles and that impact and others would reduce nearby home values, the highest of which are around Forest Lake, she said.

Paul Damiano, of Whitefield, said landfills attract scores of birds and seagulls, whose droppings would cause algae blooms and other problems with Forest Lake.

He also said the landfill would likely expand beyond its proposed size and operating duration of 38 years.

“It could be hundreds of acres of additional forest,” said Damiano. “Landfills never stay the same size. They only get bigger.”

Other residents, citing the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said all landfill liners eventually leak and a closed landfill still poses risks long after the trucks stop bringing waste.

They encouraged DES to deny the permit and protect the state park and surrounding area, including the Ammonoosuc River and nearby waterways, for current and future generations.

Sarah Doucette, a NCABC member from Whitefield, cited contaminated drinking water wells in Southbridge, Mass., near a Casella landfill.

She called the company “an applicant with a poor record of compliance who is not forthcoming.”

Jo Beth Dudley, chair of the Dalton Board of Selectmen, said Dalton voters enacted emergency temporary zoning two years ago, but Casella has not submitted a zoning application.

She asked DES to suspend the permitting process until the company submits one, and said that some of the information missing in its application for a standard operating permit, which DES put on hold following DES’s request for more information, is missing in its wetlands permit application.

Dalton select board member Tamela Swan asked that DES suspend the wetlands permitting process until Casella and landowner Douglas Ingerson Jr. allow a site visit during the wetlands growing season, when wetlands can be better studied.

Although the Dalton Conservation Commission was allowed a site visit in January, when it was agreed that another visit would be needed in the spring, Casella denied the DCC a spring visit with its certified wetlands scientist, she said.

To DES, Jon Swan, Dalton resident and founder of Save Forest Lake, said, “I’m a firm believer that a company’s past performance should serve as a precursor of things to come ... Based on my findings, this applicant has been involved in 64 lawsuits, cited for 42 environmental and operational violations, paid over \$9.25 million in fines and settlements, and has been involved in 16 accidents and deaths.”

Among the last to speak was Eliot Wessler, an NCABC member from Whitefield, who noted the company’s claim that there would be no water quality impacts.

“Mr. Gay today said it can’t happen,” said Wessler. “What hubris.”

Supporters

Scott Kleinschrodt, of Dalton, said the other businesses near Forest Lake have had no negative impacts to the area and the North Country will need a place to put its trash after the Bethlehem facility closes.

“Trust DES to do its job,” he said.

Robin Pilotte, of Dalton, said she toured the landfill in Bethlehem and was impressed.

“I do believe Casella is not going to do any harm to that location,” she said of the Dalton site. “I would like you to go ahead and approve it.”

Dalton residents Tammy St. Cyr called for a permit approval, as did Pam Kathan, who called the landfill “responsible growth in Dalton.”

“They have the rules of the permitting process to go by,” said Kathan.

Dave Leonard, of Whitefield, a truck driver who hauled trash for Casella before retiring, defended Casella and said opponents have stated a number of falsehoods, among them that 100 tractor-trailer waste haulers would go daily to Dalton.

Casella’s September 2020 traffic study estimates 52 of the big trucks daily, excluding smaller local waste haulers.

DES

The hearing was moderated by Philip Trowbridge, manager for DES’s land resources management programs, which includes the wetlands, alteration of terrain, and subsurface bureaus.

“This was an opportunity for us to hear you,” said Trowbridge. “We’ve taken lots of notes and appreciate the opportunity.”

Written and emailed comments regarding the wetlands permit can be submitted to DES, the deadline of which, after Casella agreed, was extended an additional month, from Aug. 13 to 4 p.m. Sept. 13, he said.

Robert Blechl