

GLOBE MAGAZINE

The big stink: How a proposed landfill is roiling a tiny New Hampshire town

Your used pizza boxes and other trash from Massachusetts could be part of the problem.

By **Bill Donahue** Updated January 19, 2023, 54 minutes ago



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Say you live in Massachusetts and you throw something in the trash — a greasy pizza box, a broken toy, a batch of Styrofoam peanuts — where does it go? Surely, there's someplace nearby that can serve as the eternal resting spot for such refuse, right?

Quite possibly not. Space for garbage is becoming rare in Massachusetts. [No landfill has been opened](#) in the state for nearly 30 years, and most of the six existing ones (not to be confused with local transfer stations) are [nearing capacity](#). Meanwhile, New England's largest waste company — Vermont-based Casella, which [made \\$1 billion last year](#) through its business of recycling, and hauling and burying trash — finds itself ferrying discards great distances. Across state lines. To a place so far away it is easy to forget any personal complicity in consumerism and its ugly excesses.

This faraway place is often New Hampshire — specifically, the northern third of the state, a region hard-hit by economic struggles. Over the past three decades, [hundreds of thousands of tons](#) of Massachusetts waste have ended up at a landfill in Bethlehem, New Hampshire, run by a Casella subsidiary called North Country Environmental Services. Since Casella took it over in 1994, it has nearly tripled in size — from 18 to 51 acres. With that landfill now prohibited from further growth absent approval through a town vote, Casella is gazing 7 miles north, hoping to situate a new dump in Dalton, a town that is home to 900 people and zero stoplights.

Early this year, the company will begin applying for the needed state and local permits for the Granite State Landfill, a Casella spokesperson says. Casella has expressed hopes of opening a 72-acre landfill in 2026. [Originally proposed at 137 acres](#), it was scaled back after input from the public and regulatory agencies.

But it's not certain whether Casella's vision of even a downsized landfill will ever become a reality. The company's plan has spawned a knock-down, drag-out fight in Dalton, and it's a drama that has extended all the way to the state Legislature and the desk of Governor Chris Sununu. The outcome of this high-stakes drama — however long that takes — will inevitably reach south to New England's most populous states.

Detractors predict that after opening the Dalton landfill, Casella will seek to expand it, as it did in Bethlehem.

“There is so much room for expansion,” argues Jon Swan, the Dalton proposal’s fiercest critic, “and with landfill capacity becoming a valuable commodity, once they get their foot in the door, the fight will be lost and they will obviously seek expansion.” (A Casella spokesman says there are no plans to expand.)

As Casella envisions bringing 480,000 tons annually to the Granite State Landfill, the company could gross hundreds of millions of dollars over some two decades of operation. Massachusetts trash would likely be part of the equation, as would trash from Connecticut, where Casella’s trucks began making the rounds in 2021.

At the Dalton Country Store, a gathering place in town, one question prevails: Are you for the dump or against it? Or — to put it in more philosophical terms — should New Hampshireites cleave to their state’s motto, “Live Free or Die,” and let Casella buy the land and move ahead with its plans, or should they fight to keep out Casella’s landfill in an effort to preserve another slice of their state’s natural beauty?



Chick Ingerson, who may sell a portion of his land for the proposed landfill. ROBERT BLECHL/CALEDONIAN-RECORD

The Granite State Landfill would sit just a half mile from Forest Lake, a placid, 200-acre body of water that's home to one of New Hampshire's beloved public beaches. This is a politically conservative area: Trump signs still abound, as do "Don't Tread On Me" flags. Now, with Casella hoping to turn the town into the home of New England's next waste repository, many local small-government-minded citizens are taking an unlikely stance — and eagerly welcoming the waste generated by wealthier states to the south. Indeed, they're tilting against environmentalists who aim to keep Casella out.

The conservatives' spiritual leader in this fight, arguably, is Douglas "Chick" Ingerson, the proprietor of Chick's Sand and Gravel, who in 2018 reportedly made up to [\\$1.2 million](#) selling Casella right of first refusal on land that the trash company envisions as the future home of the Granite State Landfill.

Ingerson is a proudly gruff entrepreneur. (When I called him, he said, “You ever hear of Donald Trump? That’s me.”) Over the past 40 years, he has sold timber, firewood, asphalt, and concrete, as well as sand and gravel. And he’s frequently been in the headlines.

In 2009, Ingerson launched a controversial — and ongoing — bid to turn part of his property into a drag-racing strip with 500 nearby camping spots. In 2021, as Dalton considered implementing its first-ever permanent zoning laws, he told the Select Board, “I can put anything on my land, seeing as I was there before zoning.”

It may seem logical to think that Ingerson’s prime opponent would be some buttoned-up liberal, given that the North Country has in recent years gentrified some. Littleton, a town of 6,000 adjoining Dalton, is now home to numerous trendy brew pubs and eateries. But no — Ingerson’s principal foe in the landfill fight is a former right-wing radio talk show host.

Jon Swan, a 56-year-old retiree, is an Iraq war vet who changed his last name from Alvarez in 2011 when he married Tamela Swan, who is currently a Dalton selectperson. In 2019, he founded Save Forest Lake, a one-man show that lacks a budget but nonetheless entices supporters by pumping out 15 Facebook posts a week.

In the aftermath of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, Swan became publicly militant. After the US invasion of Iraq, he launched a far-right nationalist website, Patriotic Americans Boycotting Anti-American Hollywood, lashing out at outspoken antiwar celebrities and anyone he deemed “unpatriotic.” He attended peace rallies, using a bullhorn to heckle protesters. In 2010, on a Syracuse, New York, radio station, he paid tribute to Joe Stack, who had flown his private airplane into a building in Austin, Texas, that housed the Internal Revenue Service, killing one IRS employee and injuring 13 other people. Stack was being audited at the time; his suicide note criticized the government, big corporations, and more.

In advocating for Forest Lake, Swan has continued his outrage-inducing antics. In 2020, he posted online a vintage four-minute video of an actor playing Adolf Hitler, captioned so that the Hitler character is presented as spouting pro-Casella rhetoric. (Casella, in turn, filed a defamation suit against Swan; a judge threw out some of the counts, and some are still pending.) Swan, at town meetings and votes, has also painstakingly videotaped Casella proponents regarding the proposed site and has posted on Facebook video footage captured by people flying drones over Ingerson's property.

By February 2021, Ingerson was fed up with Swan. When he encountered Swan in a parking lot in Littleton, he drove by and said, "Your day is coming." Questioned later by police, but never charged, Ingerson didn't just own up to these words — he admitted he'd ominously run his finger across his throat as he spoke, according to a police report.



The public beach at Forest Lake State Park. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

There's one thing that everyone in Dalton can agree on: It's a beautiful place. It's hilly and remote. Dirt roads undulate through the maples and beeches and pines, now dipping toward a river or stream, now climbing to afford a stunning view of the White Mountains. The vibe is deeply, delightfully rural, and the services and infrastructure are rustic as well. Dalton has no schools or police force of its own, and no trash pickup.

Enter Casella, which began in 1975 with a single pickup truck and today is a publicly-traded company owning or operating facilities in seven Northeast states, giving it a solid foothold in a flourishing industry. Nationally, the waste industry has been outperforming the stock market since 2015, growing as Americans become more desperate for a place to put their trash. We've been producing more of it almost every year since record keeping began in the 1960s, and our recycling efforts remain anemic — roughly [95 percent of the plastic we use](#) gets deep-sixed.

The work of burying our garbage has become increasingly expensive, involving, for instance, double layers of polyethylene that cap the soil to separate toxic waste heaps from ground water. Constructing a landfill can cost upward of \$1 million an acre. As a result, [private-sector companies](#) such as Casella, rather than municipal operators, now run most of the nation's landfills.

In an e-mailed statement, Casella says the Granite State Landfill is necessary, especially since its Bethlehem facility is expected to close within the next five years: “[B]ecause New Hampshire’s landfills are currently operating at their annual capacity,” the statement reads in part, “this will likely result in shipping waste greater distances, resulting in significant environmental and economic impacts to the entire state of New Hampshire.”

The placement of a landfill is always a charged issue. New facilities are often sited in or near poor communities, ostensibly to try to minimize local backlash. A [2016 study](#) conducted jointly by the University of Michigan and the University of Montana found “a consistent pattern over a 30-year period of placing hazardous waste facilities in neighborhoods where poor people and people of color live.” Casella has previously said

that the Dalton site is the best location “[hydro-geologically and for a lot of other reasons](#)” that are both technical and engineering-related.”



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In Dalton, Casella has worked hard to win hearts and minds. Early in 2020, a Casella outreach manager, Rebecca Metcalf, wrote an e-mail to Don Mooney, the proprietor of a now-shuttered shooting range known as The Dalton Gang. “John Casella has asked for my assistance in something he would like to do,” she said. “He is interested in providing a gift estimated between \$50-100k for an immediate need for the people of Dalton. This is no strings attached.”

A murky, low-quality video taken by Jon Swan captures Mooney, 82 at the time and wearing a cowboy hat, extending Casella’s offer at a Dalton Select Board meeting. The Select Board stalled, saying that the proposed gift would need to undergo legal review and a public hearing. In a statement the next day, CEO John Casella distanced himself from Mooney’s offer. “While we very much appreciate Mr. Mooney’s enthusiasm, we do not communicate donations or other offers of financial assistance to communities through individual citizens,” he said. “It can result in confusion as it did here.”

At a 2020 meeting, which took place when the landfill was still proposed at 136 acres, Casella vice president Brian Oliver spoke to Dalton residents. If the landfill were built, he said, his company would bring more than [\\$71 million](#) to their town over its years of operation — a boon to the coffers of the town, where the median household income is [around \\$50,000](#). The largest benefit would come in annual property tax payments — the first, Oliver said at the time, would be \$2.2 million — but Casella would also provide residents “property value protection.” If a Dalton homeowner were to sell at below-market value, Oliver said, “then Casella would make up that difference.”

The downsizing of the landfill proposal to 72 acres will affect the total economics, a Casella spokesman says now, but any updated agreement will include “significant annual payments” and other benefits.

Some observers in nearby Bethlehem are skeptical. Casella has indeed paid millions in taxes to Bethlehem — it laid out roughly \$250,000 in 2022 alone — but it has also taken steps to limit its tax burden. In 2001, after the town raised Casella’s property taxes,

Casella construed the high increase as “harassment” and took Bethlehem to court. The harassment argument got no legal traction, but the next year Casella persuaded New Hampshire’s Department of Environmental Services that it was (and remains) partially exempt from local taxes because it deployed “pollution control” technology.

Jeanne Robillard, a Bethlehem selectperson from 2006 to 2010, says that, cumulatively, Bethlehem has spent well over \$1 million fighting Casella in court. (Town records support this.) “There are also other more subtle expenses,” Robillard adds. “Repairing hauler truck damage on town roads, for instance, and paying an engineer to review permits.” And then, Robillard says, there are other costs to residents. “One year the town was going to spend \$16,000 to re-coat the concrete at the skateboard park,” she claims. “Instead, they repaired the asphalt outside the landfill.” (A company spokesman says Casella has made substantial donations toward parks and other municipal projects.)

Meanwhile, there have been ecological issues at the North Country Environmental Services landfill. Twice, the State of New Hampshire has slapped Casella with fines. In 2000, the state levied a six-figure fine for the illegal treatment and transport of leachates, later reduced to \$17,000, that the company says was an isolated incident. In 2004, the company was fined for the illegal dumping of asbestos, which Casella blames on a landfill customer illegally dumping it on-site.

In 2018, two environmental groups, Community Action Works (formerly Toxics Action Center) and Conservation Law Foundation, sued Casella and North Country Environmental Services, alleging that they were illegally discharging 1,4-dioxane, a suspected carcinogen, along with elevated levels of iron and manganese, into the Ammonoosuc River. [The company settled last year](#), denying wrongdoing but agreeing to clean up the metal discharges, which manifest as bright orange splotches in hillside streams.



In a July 2021 photo, Jon Swan of the anti-landfill Save Forest Lake group speaks at a community meeting. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

If the landfill comes to Dalton, a lot of money will surely be made. But in the town of today, only one person has apparently made big money from Casella so far. I tried to interview Chick Ingerson, but our phone conversation was brief. He seemed to read my call as an intrusion on his property rights. “If you don’t like what I’m doing on my land, get yourself a checkbook and buy it,” he said before urging me in colorful language to get off his land. Never mind that I was calling from my own home, many miles away. He ended our chat with a sardonic “Have a nice day!”

Jon Swan was more willing to talk. We met at the entrance to Forest Lake State Park. He arrived in a maroon Jeep Wrangler, the backdoor emblazoned with the words “Zombie Outbreak Response Team.” Beside the external spare tire was a plastic skeleton’s hand painted with fake blood. “My wife thinks she married a teenager,” quipped Swan, a husky onetime rugby player wearing a short haircut, a two-day stubble, and a chamois shirt.

We made our way to a sandy beach, and I pressed Swan on his incendiary rhetoric. “Hey, everybody needs a sledgehammer in the toolbox,” he said, suggesting his bold voice was crucial to the fight for the lake.

“Is there anything you’ve done on this campaign that you regret?” I asked. “The Hitler tape, say?”

“That’s a very popular meme,” Swan said, shrugging. “People use it for sports analogies. Of *course* some people didn’t like it. It’s edgy.”

I thought of Swan’s approach compared with another, milder Casella foe. Fred Anderson is the president of the Forest Lake Association, a homeowners group, and also a retired Presbyterian minister who spent his career in Manhattan. He started visiting the area in 1977 and now lives shoreside, in what was once his summer home, writing scholarly books. With another anti-Casella group, North Country Alliance for Balanced Change, Anderson brought hundreds of activists to the New Hampshire State House in Concord, to lobby for legislation that would have made it [harder for landfill operators to build near lakes](#). The bill passed in both the New Hampshire House and Senate before [Governor Sununu vetoed it](#).

I asked Anderson about Swan, an ally in the cause they’re fighting for if not in their different methods. “Jon is creative and tenacious,” Anderson said. “He knows the issues, and he is honest to a fault. But I certainly don’t agree with his tactics. I’m a pacifist and he’s a warrior, and many times we’ve had to tell him, ‘Jon, please stand down. You are not being helpful.’”

In a remote quadrant of New England where locals can be skeptical of newcomers, Anderson’s mere existence as a former New Yorker is problematic, especially as he’s trying to shape policy in New Hampshire. It doesn’t matter that he’s been coming here for over four decades. In a recent Facebook comment directed at a New Hampshire

newcomer opposed to Casella, Dalton native Eric Pilotte wrote, “I got an idea you [expletive] flatlanders stay out of the state of New Hampshire.”

Last spring, Pilotte’s disdain proved useful to Casella when voters in Dalton were deciding whether to adopt permanent zoning laws likely to bar the construction of Casella’s landfill. Pilotte regarded zoning as an affront to his liberty, and in the lead-up to the vote, he used a stencil and black paint to handcraft urgent signs he placed on Route 142, calling attention to the restrictions he feared new zoning would impose — even beyond the proposed landfill. “Don’t let them turn our town in to a communist town,” urged one placard.

Pilotte, meanwhile, allied with a group called Concerned Citizens of Dalton that mailed residents fliers making dark insinuations about the proposed zoning ordinance. “We don’t know if future elected officials in Dalton will like your shed plan, or the small business you want to run out of your house,” the flier said. “Zoning will let them say no.”



Demonstrators gather in July 2021 outside White Mountains Regional High School to protest the proposed Dalton landfill before a hearing on the issue, held inside the school. JIM DAVIS/GLOBE STAFF

In many ways, Concerned Citizens exudes a grass-roots spirit. A GoFundMe page shows the group inching up the thermometer toward a humble goal of \$5,000. But online, Jon Swan has questioned who was actually behind the fliers: “Are they really from Casella?” Then, on the day of the special election on zoning last June, Swan slipped into a private office right near the polls to encounter — and film — Casella’s director of landfill development, Tom Cue, as he hovered over a box filled with Concerned Citizens fliers. “Tom Cue!” Swan exclaimed as Cue kicked him out. “Are you still lying to select boards?”

The [foes of the proposed zoning prevailed](#) in a vote of 280-195, to the chagrin of the anti-Casella crowd. And that vote has served to deepen divisions. When I visited Pilotte at his home, I found that he and his wife, Robin Pilotte, had invited three like-minded Dalton friends to join them in urging me to regard the town’s current Select Board as an elitist, anti-dump cabal.

One visitor was 30-year Dalton resident Jim Dannis, a 65-year-old graduate of Harvard Law School and a whittled cyclist who logs some 5,000 miles a year. Dannis spoke precisely, his gestures taut and agitated, telling me he believes a town board “ought to be doing what is good for all the people, not just fighting the landfill for some extremists on Forest Lake.”

A retired Dalton selectman, 66-year-old Victor St. Cyr, sat beside Dannis, slumped in an overstuffed easy chair and wearing a camouflage Casella ball cap. St. Cyr traces his Dalton roots back to the town’s founding in 1764. He said that he’s a paid consultant for Casella, though he wouldn’t discuss the terms of his contract. “That’s none of your business,” he said. (St. Cyr now says he was at our meeting as a concerned citizen, not a company representative.)

To me, St. Cyr came across as an effective brand ambassador. Fluent in the local parlance, he’s passionate about his hometown, a place that, in his eyes, is now overrun by “rich people from New Jersey, people from New York and Pennsylvania” whose attitude is, “We don’t care. We’ll tax you out.” He leaned forward to stress that Casella could do

wonders for his town: “Seventy-one million dollars,” he said, in reference to the company’s promise of tax revenue. “Lighting doesn’t strike twice.”

The talk turned to a Right-To-Know request that Eric Pilotte had submitted to the Town of Dalton in August 2021, when he harbored suspicions about “a bunch of missing money in town.” Although Dalton initially asked for 30 days to respond, it ended up taking about nine months to provide more than 1,000 pages of documents.

“We wanted all the e-mails the selectmen sent to all the different departments and to each other,” Robin Pilotte explained. “We were looking for certain information because they don’t tell you anything at the Select Board meeting.”

The “missing money” narrative didn’t seem to hold up. But I couldn’t look past the deep suspicion guiding Pilotte’s inquiry. “Years ago, you didn’t have to go to the selectmen’s meeting. You knew what they were doing,” he said. “They were working with the people. You trusted ‘em.”

Pilotte and his allies are now pushing for the passage of two warrant articles at Dalton’s annual Town Meeting, set for March 14. They would abolish both the Dalton Planning Board and the Conservation Commission.

Pilotte grew up in Dalton. His ancestors did too, and he feels that the community has changed. It has become colder, he says, professionalized and technocratic. An observer might wonder why this happened. Was it the arrival of monied newcomers? Could it be blamed on Chick Ingerson’s entrepreneurial zeal or on Jon Swan’s videotaping? Or could Casella be assigned some of the blame, for perceiving a growing cultural chasm in Dalton and then fanning the flames?

Before I left the North Country, I met with Jeanne Robillard, the former Bethlehem selectperson, who now lives in nearby Whitefield, on the shore of Burns Pond. It was a sunny, warm afternoon in October, so we strolled out toward the water. “I left Bethlehem

because I just couldn't take it anymore," she said. She'd had enough of the fighting with Casella and with the company's local proponents. "They drove me out."

During her tenure on the Bethlehem board, there were shouting matches at town meetings. There was a Casella videographer on hand to film the scuffles, she says, and when she ran into neighbors, they often gave her the silent treatment.

In 2010, North Country Environmental Services, the Casella subsidiary, sought to scuttle Robillard's reelection bid and mailed Bethlehem voters a DVD mockingly titled "The Latest in Reality TV: Jeannie, Live!" The video used tactically edited footage of Select Board meetings to cast Robillard as a tyrant. She was not reelected. Kevin Roy, the landfill's general manager, defended the DVD in an interview at the time, saying, "I have First Amendment rights."

Robillard and I lingered for a few minutes by Burns Pond. A few miles away, the Casella landfill in Bethlehem was likely its usual hive of activity, with trucks rumbling in, bearing tons of garbage apiece, and a giant bulldozer-like machine maneuvering about the dump's mountains of trash. Robillard told me that she saw her new home as a place where she put her war with Casella behind her, saying, "This is my 'fly away with the fairies' house."

But then she learned of the company's plans to build beside Forest Lake, which empties into Burns Pond. In 2019, as hostilities in Dalton were just starting, Robillard went to a public hearing there. Stepping to the microphone, she called Bethlehem's long dance with Casella a "nightmare that has lasted 30 years."

"I did not want to be here tonight," Robillard said. But the mounting discord in Dalton scared her; the similarities with what had been ongoing in Bethlehem were too stark. "I've been watching your conversations on Facebook," she said, "and my God, you sound like Bethlehem already and [Casella's] not even here yet."

“And you know what?” she continued, predicting that Dalton would become a seedbed of strife. “This is going to be your town forever if that company that shall not be named gets its foot in the door. The landfill runs through everything in Bethlehem, and that is the saddest part of it all, the saddest part.”

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