

Trash talk: Should Casella return or stay out? Issue divides Central Mass. town

This isn't the first fight over an issue in Hardick. Horses riled up residents earlier this year. Now, it's a garbage dump that has this town once again divided.



Henry Schwan Worcester Telegram & Gazette

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HARDWICK — Appalled and terrified.

That's the overall feeling in Hardick. At least that's how Lisa Cohen sees it, as the possible reopening of a landfill could bring tons of garbage and negative environmental impacts to this rural community of 2,600 west of Worcester.

Cohen belongs to the group Hardwick Villages for Responsible Growth, a group determined to stop Vermont-based Casella Waste Systems Inc. from reopening and expanding the closed landfill. Currently, there are five active solid waste landfills in Massachusetts, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection, in Bourne, Dartmouth, Middleborough, Nantucket and Westminster.

Hardwick voters in 2007 rejected a zoning change that would have kept the landfill open. Now Casella is back, offering more than \$2 million annually to the town if the landfill reopens. Some feel the town could use the money. Others say no way.

It's a familiar scenario as other New England communities have fought landfill expansion. One notable case happened in Southbridge, where residents in 2017 soundly rejected a referendum that would have allowed Casella to potentially expand a landfill.

Community group: No landfill wanted

Standing outside the locked gate to the closed landfill, Cohen was among a handful of activists who didn't mince words.

“There's definitely some promises (from Casella) of support and money that a landfill would bring, but the vast majority in Hardwick are appalled and terrified because of environmental and health concerns,” said Cohen.

Casella declined an interview request and provided a statement that said a landfill has numerous benefits: “We believe that the proposed reopening of this facility represents a good opportunity for the Hardwick community to realize significant public benefit through a host community agreement, and the additional disposal capacity will serve Massachusetts well.”

The statement added that all parties, including Hardwick residents, will have input in the project as it's developed.

Activists point to an aquifer under the landfill that could become contaminated from trash that leaks harmful chemicals if the dump reopens. That's a real danger, they claim, because the aquifer supplies drinking water to some Hardwick residents and Ware. Ware Town Manager Stuart Beckley said it's unclear if water from the aquifer runs into town, but he's watching developments closely.

"Ware will be concerned and interested in the progress of (Casella's landfill) application," said Beckley.

The nearby Quabbin Reservoir, which supplies drinking water to 3 million people in Eastern Massachusetts, could also suffer potential contamination if Casella is successful, said activists. They have other worries: possible noxious smells and dangerous methane gas leaks from the landfill. Plus pollution and noise from garbage trucks barreling through town.



Hardwick Villages for Responsible Growth has a track record of stopping efforts that it deems a threat. Earlier this year it helped defeat a move by the former owner of Suffolk Downs to bring a horse breeding, retirement and racing facility to town. Now the group has lawn signs dotting Hardwick roads that call on residents to reject the landfill's resumption. "The reaction by most people is a regional landfill is a terrible threat to our town," said the group's Meg Haight.

Landfill: 'Beneficial to the town'

Not everyone in Hardwick supports that message.

"The landfill has been beneficial to the town, and I feel it will be beneficial in the future," said Daniel Roach. His father opened the landfill in 1968 as a depository for the town's

trash, and Roach questioned those who claim reopening it will create environmental hazards. He mentioned earlier studies, paid for by Roach's company, David G. Roach & Sons Inc., that showed no impact to water flowing from the aquifer.

In 2003, Roach's family sold the landfill to Casella. Four years later the dump closed after Town Meeting rejected Casella's bid for a zoning change that would have kept it open. Roach explained the landfill was established in the years before zoning regulations. As a result, the land is zoned residential, and it must change to industrial to stay open.

The project is a nonstarter, said Hardwick Town Administrator Nicole Parker, because Casella hasn't applied for any local permits. It submitted a draft host community agreement that spells out the expected \$2.6 million in yearly payments to Hardwick, but Parker said the town won't consider it until she knows how residents feel about reopening the landfill.

A town vote on Casella's request for a zoning change should help answer that question, she said.

Meanwhile, all three members of Hardwick's Select Board declined interview requests for this story. Parker said she was given permission by the board to speak on its behalf and revealed that board member Kelly Kemp recused herself from any official discussions pertaining to the landfill because she works for David G. Roach & Sons.

A second board member, Chairman Robert Ruggles, could recuse himself because he once worked for Roach's company, according to Parker.

Landfill violations

A review of state documents shows Casella was cited for multiple violations by the state DEP before and after the landfill closed. Infractions included collapsed underground

drainage pipes, leachate stored in a liner instead of a tank, and failure to timely notify authorities about damage to a groundwater monitoring well.

Fines levied included \$63,000 in 2008 and \$15,000 in 2005.

When Casella Regional Vice President Brian Oliver initially presented the project to Hardwick in July, he called it “an exceptional project for the town.” Highlights include:

- Expected reopening in 2028.
- Increasing the landfill's size from its current 10 acres to 48, made possible by Roach’s company selling a 38-acre gravel pit to Casella.
- Roughly 50 trucks will enter Hardwick daily to deliver an annual load of 350,000 tons of municipal solid waste and construction and demolition debris. That’s more than 1,000 tons a day, as the landfill is open six days per week.
- A draft host community agreement from Casella spells out a \$2.6 million annual payment to Hardwick over the expected 13-year life of the landfill. The company would pay \$6 per ton of trash delivered, plus \$500,000 for use of the town’s municipal wastewater treatment plant to process leachate.
- If a system is developed to transform gases released by the landfill into renewable energy, Hardwick would receive a portion of the net revenues.

Besides locking up the host community agreement, Casella must meet all required state and local regulations. On the local side, besides the zoning vote, Casella wants the town to increase the landfill's height to more than 800 feet.

Predictions

Roach would like a positive outcome for Casella. While he was diplomatic — “Everyone has their own opinion, and we’ll see how it goes” — he also revealed a smidgen of frustration with those who don’t want trash going to a landfill.

“It drives me bananas. People put their trash at the end of the driveway. Trash has to go somewhere.”

Speaking for Hardwick Villages for Responsible Growth, activist Robert Page feels the fight to stop the landfill is about protecting the town’s future.

“We’re trying to ensure the same rural experience for future generations that we’ve had. We think reopening the landfill will really disrupt that.”

Contact Henry Schwan at henry.schwan@telegram.com. Follow him on X: [@henrytelegram](https://twitter.com/henrytelegram).